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COVER

> NFL

STORY 12 Star quality

Quarterback Tony Romo, determined to make his 15 minutes last for years, is ready to help his Cowboys get to the postseason-and win. By Ryan Fagan

> COLLEGE FOOTBALL

18 The coach you love to hate

Nick Saban's offseason move from the NFL to Alabama got a lot of people talking. Now it's his turn. By Tom Dienhart

> BASEBALL

22 Special delivery

Whether it's mesmerizing hitters with his funky sidearm motion or connecting with fans through the wired world, Twins reliever Pat Neshek is leaving quite an impression. By Pat Borzi

> BASEBALL

29 Getting to know Ryan Braun

Six things you'll want to find out about the Brewers' hot, hot, hot rookie third baseman. By Matt Crossman

> NBA

52 Three-leaf clover

The Celtics' bold trade for Kevin Garnett gives them a trio of All-Stars. But will it be enough to turn their luck around? By Steve Bulpett

> Send your editorial comments to Senior VP/Editorial Director John Rawlings at jrawlings@sportingnews.com.

HIS NEEK

KNOW IT ALL

- To Know List Life-and footballgoes on at Virginia Tech.
- On Deck A veritable football feast with a PGA appetizer.
- My Turn Tricia Garner explores the world through a sports-tinted lens.
- Your Turn Gagne and Garnett are hot topics in Boston. Plus, Bob Hille's Starting 5.
- **Numbers That Count**
- Sports Talk with fitness guru Dr. lan Smith. Plus, Oklahoma State cornerback Martel Van Zant's silent world.

INSIDER

- **BASEBALL+Fantasy Source**
- 35 NASCAR
- 40 NFL
- 50 COLLEGE FOOTBALL
- **NBA**
- **COLLEGE BASKETBALL**

56 EXPOSURE

COVER: TONY ROMO BY ROBERT SEALE FOR SN; INSET: PAT NESHEK BY AL BELLO / GETTY IMAGES

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Sure, Manning is a Super Bowl champ. but is he worth your first-round choice?

/FANTASY FOOTBALL/

Draft-day tips

As NFL training camps hit high gear, fantasy owners are getting ready for draft day. Fantasy Source Football has all the tools to help you prepare-from player rankings and projections to live mock drafts and daily columns-so you can decide whether Peyton Manning is worth a first-round pick. Go to fantasygames.sportingnews.com/football.

Sign up early

Time is running out on the early-bird special for Ultimate Fantasy Football, Draft & Trade Fantasy Football and Fantasy Football Commissioner. Find out more at fantasygames.sportingnews.com.

/NFL/ With the No. 1 pick, the Browns select ...

Teams are training hard for the 2007 season, but we already have our eye on the 2008 draft. Take a look at our early mock draft and find out the top players at each position at sportingnews.com/nfl/warroom.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL/ The best player you've never seen

Let Mike DeCourcy introduce you to Jason Thompson, a 6-10 center for Rider who topped 20 points and 10 rebounds per game last season. Go to sportingnews.com/cbasketball.



/MEMBERS/ Five-star profile

User name: chrismarcengill

Hometown: Clemson, S.C.

Favorite teams: Clemson, Red Sox, Browns, Cavaliers, Hurricanes

Least favorite teams: Yankees, Steelers, Pistons, Red Wings, Duke, South Carolina

Fantasy status: Top 1 percent in hoops; top 5 percent in baseball and football.

On Tommy Bowden: "Nothing wrong with the talent. The coach doesn't know how to use it. Tommy has to step it up!"

On the Week 1 Clemson-Florida State matchup: "This will be a great game as it always is. This has got to be one of the best father-son matchups in NCAA history."

On Oklahoma's chances without Adrian Peterson: "Oklahoma without Peterson is like professional boxing without Mike Tyson. They don't need him!"

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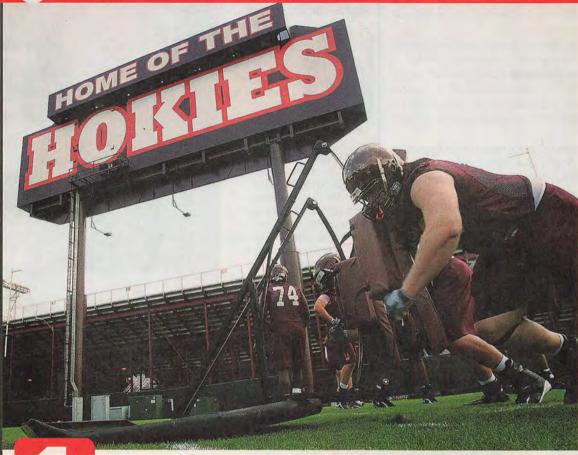
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MATTHEW KUTZ / SN ARCHIVES

TOKNOWLIST

things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week



THE MAIN EVENT

A time of healing

Practice has started for college football coaches across the nation. But the first 40-yard sprint, monkey roll and jumping jack meant a little more to Virginia Tech's Frank Beamer. More than anything, the start of practice signaled another chance for the Tech campus and community—the "Hokie family" as Beamer likes to call it—to convalesce.

"I think the football team is just like everyone else," Beamer says. "We want to be with each other. We want to have a big hug together."

The campus events of April 16 still throb.

Sanctity and safety were shattered forever when 33 people were killed in the deadliest shooting in U.S. history. Though football is just a game, it's also a salve for many in Blacksburg. The team—their team—will serve as a rallying point for the Hokie faithful Beamer talks about so passionately.

The mantra shouted after breaking team huddles says it all: "None of us is as good as *all* of us."

"People want to rally around the team,"

In the aftermath of tragedy, Virginia Tech and the rest of the

Hokie family press on.

effort? Will we have respect for our opponents? That's what we're focusing on so people will be proud of us." Hokie Spirit will crescendo when Virginia Tech opens the season against East Carolina on September 1. That day, the world will peek in, wanting to see if all is well for those living and learning among the Hokie Stone buildings on campus. The

Highty-Tighties—the Regimental Band of the Corps of Cadets will march into Lane Stadium. Soon after, the team will take the

field. School tradition

has dictated that one

player carry an Amer-

ican flag onto the field

Beamer says. "But to rally around the team, you have to be proud of us. Are we going to execute well? Are we going to give good

and another tote a Virginia state flag. This year, a third player will carry a flag, one designed to serve as a symbol of the tragedy. It features an orange ribbon with a "VT" overlay. The emblem also will be displayed as a patch on players' jerseys.

"We have more people paying attention to us after the tragedy," Beamer says. "And I think we have more people pulling for us."

Lane Stadium will be rocking.

—Tom Dienhart

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: THE 2007-08 NBA SCHEDULE TV ratings

After a two-day delay to accommodate the sudden "it"-ness of the Celtics, the NBA released its 2007-08 schedule last week. The national TV lineup is wonderful, terrible and everywhere in between. On a 1-10 scale:

A 10 for openers. Greg Oden makes his debut in San Antonio on October 30 (TNT). Kevin Durant makes his in Denver the following night (ESPN). Are we there yet?

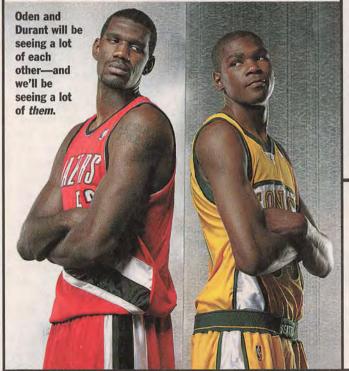
An 8 for homecomings. Ray Allen and Kevin Garnett are in Seattle on December 27 (TNT) and Minneapolis on February 8 (ESPN).

A 6 for the Christmas Day tripleheader. Heat-Cavs and Lakers-Suns (ABC), four teams that will make a combined 94 national appearances, are like your extended family. Sonics-Blazers (ESPN)—Durant vs. Oden, Part 1—is like your uncle's hot new girlfriend who likes to party.

A 4 for hot newcomers. Eleven appearances for the Blazers, 10 for the C's and eight for the Sonics. That's not enough.

A 2 for same-old, same-old. Does anybody outside Miami want to sit through 24 Heat games?

A 0 for the 76ers, Pacers and Hawks. Yeah, that's less than a 1. But so is their number of times on national TV. —Steve Greenberg



It's a jolly holiday

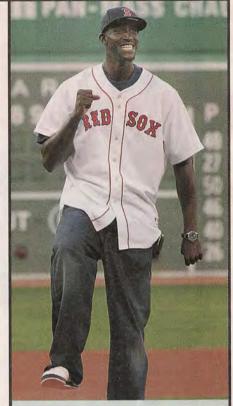
All right, you Madden maniacs. Your holiday—Maddenoliday, as the kids are calling it these days—is almost here. **Madden 08** (\$59.99, Xbox



360 and PlayStation 3) hits stores Tuesday, and you'd better start making plans to stake out

your place in line. It'll be worth it. The gameplay is beyond mind-boggling, with up to 60 frames per second on the Xbox 360 (30 per second on the PS3). The all-new weapons system gives true star players attributes based on their reallife abilities-make one-handed catches with Terrell Owens or cover elite receivers with Champ Bailey. The Hit Stick has been revamped, and you can pummel opponents with midair collisions or knock them silly with bone-jarring blasts to your heart's content.

Just take it easy on Vince Young. He's got enough to worry about, what with that whole cover jinx and all. —Ryan Fagan



Now taking the mound for the Red Sox ... Kevin Garnett?

Not quite—K.G. was merely throwing out the first pitch against the Orioles, but the Sox did go on to win the game. A harbinger of good things in Beantown? Find out on page 52.

QUICK CLICKS All broken up

UPS might have found the perfect imperfect pitchman for its new contest pitting the best amateur football interception videos against one another: former NFL quarterback Archie Manning. In addition to a cash prize, the winner gets a tailgate party with Manning, he of 173 career interceptions. The contest is open now; winners will be announced in January. Go to ups.com/challenge to download video of your one shining moment of backyard football glory. Vintage videos are welcome—no college or pro stuff, though—so if you can digitize that old high school highlight reel, send it in and you could wind up barbecuing brats with Peyton and Eli's dad. —Ryan Fagan

'I had rashes on my head. I felt like I was getting sick at times.
It's tough to go up there and be in this situation. Alex, I'm rooting for you.
I'll be there for you. I'll help you through it all. I'm praying for you.'

—Barry Bonds to the San Francisco Chronicle on the day he and potential career home run king Alex Rodriguez each hit milestone homers—Bonds his 755th, A-Rod his 500th



Cowboys owner denies being jealous over facial tautness of Irvin bust >> Hall committee passes resolution demanding inductees thank at least 20% more people

I DECK

A little powder and Jaworski doesn't look a day over 25.

THIS I GOTTA SEE All times Eastern



What's that off in the distance. Tiger-a 2007 major win?

SUN 12

We're not sayin', we're just sayin'-if Tiger Woods isn't the star of the show in the final round of the PGA Championship (2 p.m., CBS), then a full year will have gone by since Tiger won a major. And that would be simply unacceptable by our bogey golfplaying standards.

MON 13 Broncos at 49ers (8 p.m., ESPN). What do Jay Cutler, Alex Smith and Ron Jaworski have in common? They're all young bucks trying to make it in this biz. To the untrained eye, the only difference is Jaworski is 56 years old and wearing makeup.

TUE 14 Honor Roll: College Football's Top 10 (6 p.m., ESPNU) takes an hourlong look at the best rivalries in the game. And you know what that means: Army-Navy, Auburn-Alabama, Michigan-Ohio State and What Lee Corso Just Said-What Lee Corso Is About to Say.

WED 15 Hard Knocks (10 p.m., HBO). What's life after Trent Green like for the Chiefs? Not to get too technical, but: Larry Johnson left, Larry Johnson right, Larry Johnson up the middle, Larry Johnson please be careful ... and, um, Larry Johnson, one more thing? Please show up.

FRI 17 Football America: Cosell at Large (8 p.m., NFL Network), a 36-year-old documentary, chronicles the life and times of Howard Cosell, the most fantastic, sarcastic and bombastic sportscaster of his or any other era. Sorry, SportsCenter anchorsyou're all just a bunch of hopeless wannabes. - Steve Greenberg

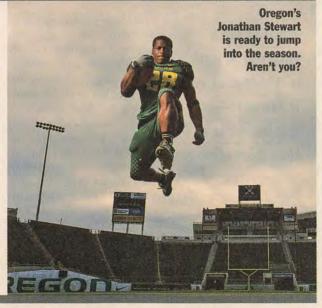


COMING AT YOU

In the August 20 issue

The stuff that matters! Start with the regular season-this isn't college basketball, OK?-when every Saturday (and even some Thursdays and Fridays) matters as we eat, drink, cheer and second-guess everything possible on our march toward the Big Easy and a magical night under the ... uh ... in the dome. This is college football-and the really important stuff you need to know about the 2007 season. We've got the who, what, when and where of it all to make you an instant expert. So risk the violation and text message your friends-kickoff (think the 30, not the 35) is less than three weeks

In time for the hottest days of the summer. some burning questions in baseball.





College football. Teams are reporting for the new season, but past years always have a lingering impact. This year it's the Boise State Effect. Invited walk-ons at UNLV? Penn & Teller.

Daunte Culpepper. How desperate for work was this guy? He signed with the Raiders ... but only after he got turned down as a customer service rep in Bangalore.

N.L. Central. Man, how 'bout the Brewers' fall? Milwaukeeans don't know what hit them. In fact, Brewers fans are so upset they've quit drinking.

Brady Quinn. He was a no-show when Browns camp opened. Come to find out he was holding out: I thought he might've still been waiting in the greenroom.

August. Wow, is the NFL sensitive. I was at a training camp and just in passing mentioned "the dog days of summer" andwham!-Goodell suspended me.

When I have a

good day at work,

is it because I am

in the zone-or

is it thanks to a

total team effort?

Tricia Garner

Young and Restless

Life is a fastball down the middle

Or a home run. Or a fumble. Just be a sport and let some good cliches be your guide.

"I've come to realize that almost everything in dating and relationships has a parallel in sports, especially baseball."—P.J. Franklin

hat, in a nutshell, is the premise of the sitcom *My Boys* (Mondays, 10 p.m. ET on TBS). P.J. Franklin is a Cubs beat reporter for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, a single woman surrounded by male friends who thinks of everything in her life in sports terms.

Like, for example, the great guy she starts dating—he's a five-tool boyfriend. She compares hooking up with him to being called up to the majors. When someone introduces a new (and annoying) friend to the mix, the interloper is likened to a clubhouse cancer. When the guys hit a dating dry spell, they hit the bars in an attempt to break out of their "slump." And an entire episode is devoted to the idea of taking one for the team—in this case, moving from the bustling Chicago downtown to the sleepy suburbs.

The analogies extend beyond relationships. The guy who always gets the credit at work? The one who scores the game-winning shot in pickup basketball every single time? The neighbor with a brandnew sports car? They're life's superstars. They're above the rules—somehow untouchable. Even when they're insufferable and obnoxious, we put up

with it because, well, they're superstars.

The show brings up an interesting question: Can life really be summed up by sports terms and cliches? When I run 5 minutes longer than I did the last time I worked out, is it because records are made to be broken? When I have a good day at work, is it because I am in the zone—or is it thanks to a total



Hmm ... the guy on the left is a proven veteran, but the one on the right has nice potential ...

team effort? If I turn down a guy for a date because I like another guy better, is it because there are no points for second place? Can the less, uh, genetically blessed of us be referred to as solid, fundamental players instead of flashy phenoms?

I'm kidding—kind of—but it does make some sense. P.J. describes the giddiness of a new relationship this way: "Now that I'm dating Hank, it's like I went out and picked up the free agent that will bring me a championship." But as, say, Barry Zito could tell you, sometimes it doesn't always go according to plan. "When you've invested so much into a free agent and he

starts dropping flies and striking out, part of you doesn't want to let him go," she says. "You just keep hoping things will turn around. But sometimes both of you are better served if he just goes and plays somewhere else."

Who can't relate to that?

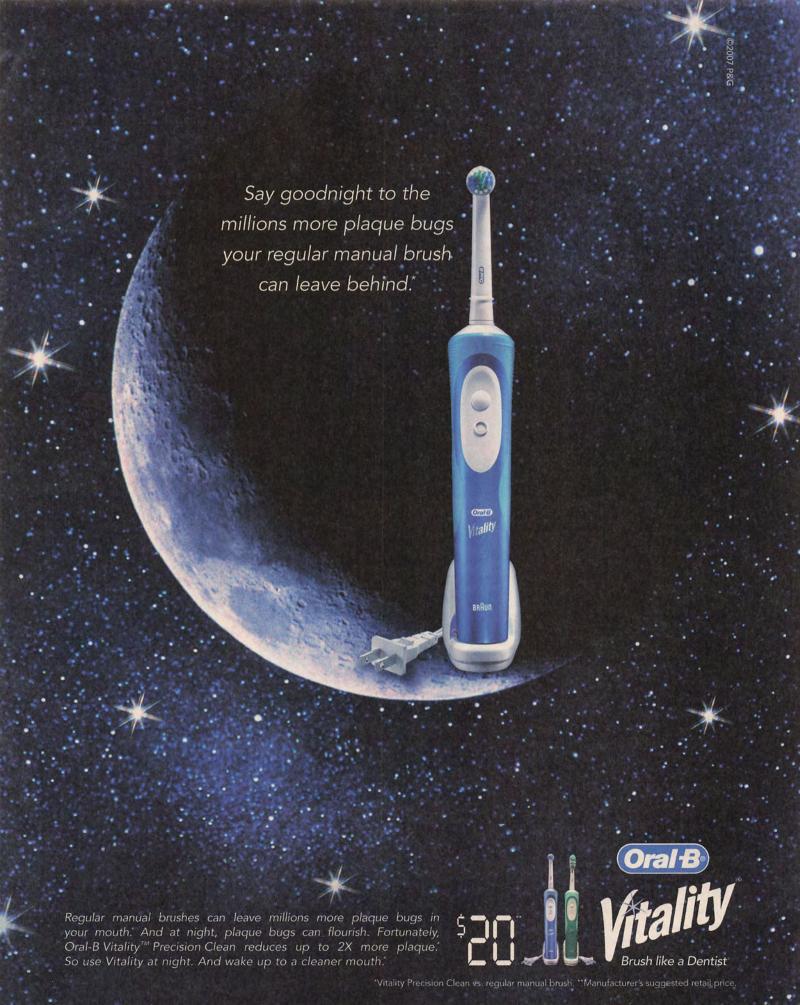
Jamie Kaler, who plays P.J.'s friend (and former Cubs front office exec) Mike on the

show, says sports are a perfect mirror for reality: "Not everyone can be a winner. You're trying to get into college? Not everyone's going to Harvard. Life is a competition." Although, he concedes, there are limits to the whole sports-is-life thing: "I always laugh when they say it's not over 'til it's over. It's like, yeah, that's why they play nine innings. I get it."

OK, that works for those of us who grew up with a glove in one hand and a ball in the other, but what about nonsports fans? The show's star, Jordana Spiro, wasn't exactly Suzy Kolber when she took the role, but even she sees merit in the idea. "We talk a lot about athletes having the opportunity to have a doover," she says. "You know, once they're in a slump, they have to keep thinking of every game like a new game. Every game is a new opportunity, and they have to stop thinking about yesterday's game or there's no way they'll have the focus to pull themselves out of that slump. I like that."

In other words ... you have to stay focused? You have to take it one game at a time? You control your own destiny?

Well, there's plenty of upside in that.



CHARLES KRIIDA / AD: STEVEN SENNE / AD: SN ABCHINES

YOUR TURN

You rant, we listen. Send e-mails to yourturn@sportingnews.com



- If the Cavaliers can win the Eastern Conference with LeBron James and a bunch of mediocre players, I love the chances of Kevin Garnett, Ray Allen and Paul Pierce playing in June.
- -shane4913 via SportingNews.com
- Garnett, Allen and Pierce? I wonder who is going to be unhappy first. You don't put three No. 1 guys on the same team without someone complaining about not getting his shots. —JuicyFruit-Warrior via SportingNews.com
- What Michael Vick has been indicted for (SN, July 30) is horrible and inhumane. But how many times have we watched a star player get a slap on the wrist for domestic abuse? Vick should be punished, but I want to see Roger Goodell and other heads of pro sports leagues be twice as hard on the next player guilty of any type of abuse toward another person. Robert Amey, Sandusky, Mich.
- Good luck, Daunte Culpepper. With that pathetic O-line the Raiders have, you'll be testing that knee early and often. —cowboylee1226 via SportingNews.com
- Bill Walsh will be missed by many. He is one of the reasons the NFL is the way it is today. His football genius helped to mold the careers of many great players. —stl2hky via SportingNews.com

POLLING PLACE

Which all-time great slugger would you most like to have watched in person?



Hank Aaron Bonds Mays

Babe Ruth

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RADIO*STAR

Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

'Now that NFL training camps are here, we can start worrying about the important things again—like how no one will be able to stop the Pats! It's New England's year once again.'

-Zach in Portland, Maine, on the Dave Smith Show

BLOG ON

From your blogs on sportingnews.com

RE: HOLD YOUR FIRE

Posted by feathersforever
The trading deadline has passed, and it is time for the annual bashing of Nationals G.M. Jim
Bowden for not pulling the trigger on a major trade. Let the bashing end here. Bowden did a great job by staying pat. The Nationals are in the process—and it is quite a process—of attempting to build a contender. The pieces are slowly falling into place, which means they can be selective with whom they get

RE: SAY GOODBYE

rid of and whom they keep.

Posted by benji916

Theo Epstein, it is time to cut your losses with Wily Mo Pena. It is apparent that there is not a spot for him on this team. He has a big hit here and there but will never amount to anything in Boston.



RE: SUPER 8 Posted by ito06

The Timberwolves easily won the Kevin Garnett trade. Here are eight reasons why:

- 1. Boston loses all of its depth.
- 2. Boston is old-very, very old.
- 3. That team from the Motor City is still the class of the East.
- 4. The "C" word: chemistry.
- The T-wolves' young stars have potential and are dreaming big.
- 6. No more of K.G.'s huge contract.
- 7. Boston still has to put five players on the court. Rajon Rondo is erratic, and Kendrick Perkins acts helpless.
- Boston will have to beat a
 Western Conference team in The
 Finals anyway.

NUMBERS THAT COU

QualityChecked

DNFs for defending Cup champion Jimmie Johnson this season. Last year, he finished every race but one.



Influence is often difficult to quantify. Fortunately for football fans. Bill Walsh's indelible impact on the game remains easily measurable 19 years after he last walked an NFL sideline. The legendary 49ers coach, who died last week, has his fingerprints all over the league in the form of 22 current head coaches who can trace their lineage back to Walsh. Take a deep breath and try your best to follow along.

FIRST GENERATION (assistant to Walsh)

Mike Holmgren

SECOND GENERATION (via Walsh assistants)

Mike Shanahan (George Seifert) Jeff Fisher (Seifert) Andy Reid (Holmgren) Jon Gruden (Holmgren) Dick Jauron (Holmgren)

Tony Dungy (Dennis Green) Brian Billick (Green) John Fox (Mike White) Sean Payton (Ray Rhodes) Mike McCarthy (Rhodes)

THIRD GENERATION

Lovie Smith (Dungy) Mike Tomlin (Dungy) Rod Marinelli (Dungy) Herm Edwards (Dungy) Jack Del Rio (Billick) Marvin Lewis (Billick) Mike Nolan (Billick)

Gary Kubiak (Shanahan) Brad Childress (Reid) Scott Linehan (Mike Tice, via Green) Lane Kiffin (Pete Carroll, via Bruce Coslet)

A royal reign

Consecutive appearances

made by Kansas City's Tony Pena before Yankees lefthander Sean Henn accomplished what no pitcher had been able to do since May 5-walk the Royals shortstop. Pena's franchise-record streak ended in the eighth inning of a 7-0 win over the Yankees on July 26 and brought his season walks total to seven.



STARS AND STRIPES

Minute Washington State basketball guard Derrick Low played in Team USA's two losses at the Pan Am Games. He did not score.

43 Points Low scored in the team's three wins.

28-0 The U.S. senior men's team record with Jason Kidd running the point. He will get the chance to improve on that mark when the U.S. team makes a run at a 2008 Olympic berth at the FIBA Championship later this month.



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Another lasting impact

.....

Skip Prosser took three schools to the NCAA Tournament in his first season as head coach (Loyola, Md., Xavier and Wake Forest). He is the only coach in Division I history to do so.

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Medical expert on VH1's Celebrity Fit Club, founder of 50 Million Pound Challenge weight-loss campaign

SN: Tell me about the 50 Million Pound Challenge (50millionpounds.com).

DR. IAN: I've been working out for many years. I kept thinking, what can I do to be part of the solution to obesity? Just trying to tell people they need to lose weight is not working.

SN: What's the biggest obstacle people face in losing weight?

DR. IAN: Discipline. People are willing to try and do the right thing, but they lack the discipline and sticktoitiveness to stay with it.

SN: And the biggest mistake they make? DR. IAN: They try to do too much too fast. What happens is, they are able to do it for a short period of time. Then they become overwhelmed and discouraged and vacate the program. If you take small steps, those small steps lead to a great reward.

SN: Which athlete would you love to see on Celebrity Fit Club?

DR. IAN: Phil Mickelson, He's a very talented golfer and he's got a pretty interesting personality, so he would fit from a personality perspective. But he could definitely use some conditioning. You look at him walking on the fairway and you go to yourself, "Wow, this guy hasn't worked out in a while."

SN: You dish out a lot of tough love on the show. Which athlete needs a helping?

DR. IAN: You know what? Albert Pujols. He's very active and very successful. He's a great baseball player-don't get me wrong-but I think I could make him a more chiseled athlete. A little more conditioning would make him an even better athlete and hitter.

> SN: If a strip club offered a fresh vegetable happy hour beginning at 3 a.m., would you advise NFL players to go there?

DR. IAN: Absolutely not. Because you know what comes with strip clubs? SN: Women? Not enough sleep? DR. IAN: Alcohol consumption. All of the vegetables in the world will not make up for the

empty calories in alcohol. -Tricia Garner

'I won't be

affected by the

big crowd. I can

focus on what's

happening on

the field. But

when the crowd

gets really loud,

I can feel the

vibrations.'

The strength of silence

Go ahead, yell at Oklahoma State cornerback Martel Van Zant from the stands. And opponents, let him have a big dose of your best trash talk. It doesn't bother him.

Van Zant is deaf.

"I don't hear it, so I don't mind," says Van Zant, signing his answer back to an interpreter at Big 12 media days. "But my opponents usually play harder when they find out I'm deaf."

A silent world is all Van Zant has known. His mother contracted chicken pox when she was pregnant with him, resulting in his loss of hearing.

And he's doing just fine. In fact, he's thriving. Van Zant led

Oklahoma State with six pass breakups last fall and ranked fourth on the team with 67 tackles. The senior is penciled in to start for the second straight season. He's one of the Big 12's best and may have a future in the NFL.

But nothing gets the 6-1, 210-pounder going like a big hit: "I can feel a hit and tell when one is bigger than the other." Van Zant smiles. There's no need for interpretation. But Van Zant needs his interpreter at his hip throughout the day—in classes, at practices. Teammates want to help by learning sign language. "But a lot of them, they want to learn the cuss words first," says Van Zant.

Oklahoma State coach

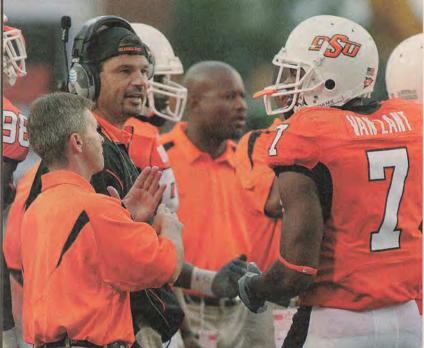
Mike Gundy feels Van Zant would have been recruited by all the big-time schools had he not been deaf. Some were unsure how to work with a deaf player, but that didn't scare then-Cowboys coach Les Miles, who has a deaf brother and knows American Sign Language.

Although being oblivious to trash talk has its advantages, Van Zant does have one big issue to deal with: the referee's whistle. "I have to watch other players and wait for them to stop moving," says Van Zant. "I also have to wait for the receiver to move." What about late-hit calls? He has to have had a few of those. "No," says Van Zant.

Oklahoma State could be one of the nation's biggest surprises this season. Van Zant and the Pokes will discover how good they are quickly; Oklahoma State opens the season September 1 at Georgia. Sanford Stadium will be loud.

"I won't be affected by the big crowd," says Van Zant. "I can focus on what's happening on the field. But when the crowd gets really loud, I can feel the vibrations." -Tom Dienhart

Van Zant's interpreter, Allie Lee, goes with him everywhere-even on the sideline.



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hat's it like, being Tony Romo?
Wasn't that long ago that his l

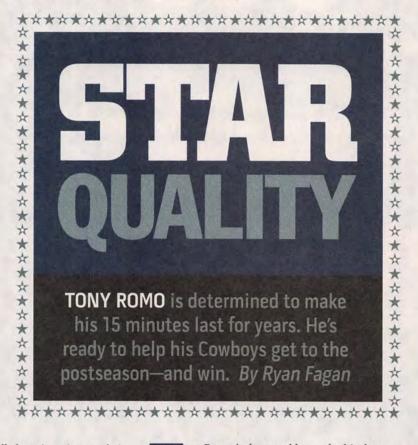
Wasn't that long ago that his life was a lot like yours. He hooped it up on the basketball court after work, played golf on his days off and tried like hell to impress his big bosses on the job. One day last October, he got his opportunity. Romo became the starting quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys, and life as he knew it ceased to exist.

So how about now? That question posed to the Cowboys' newest star as he trotted off the Alamodome field after a recent training practice. He flashed that All-American grin of his and gave what was surely an insightful and eloquent answer, but there was no way of knowing what he said. Even he couldn't hear his verbalized thoughts. Romo was headed toward a tunnel underneath the stands, toward quieter interviewing pastures, but at that moment, he was traipsing through a gantlet of fans, most wearing his No. 9 jersey, all screaming, "Tony! ... Tony! ... Tony!" Thousands of outstretched arms held footballs and jerseys and Sharpies,

and thousands of voices called out in unison to their new hero. It was pretty much the opposite of the treefalls-in-a-forest conundrum but with the same result. His answer, his certainly profound statement on the circus his life has become, never stood a chance.

He paused and looked up into the stands, then glanced left and finally to the right. That grin broke through again, and he shrugged his shoulders and just mouthed the word, "See?" Then he doubled back to say hi to his grandparents and sign a tiny baby girl's Cowboys outfit, with the still-bald beauty wearing it. This is his life now. "It's still a little different to me sometimes because I'm still the same guy I was a few years ago," he says. "It's neat that people care about you that much, but at some times I don't even know why. Still, it's fun."

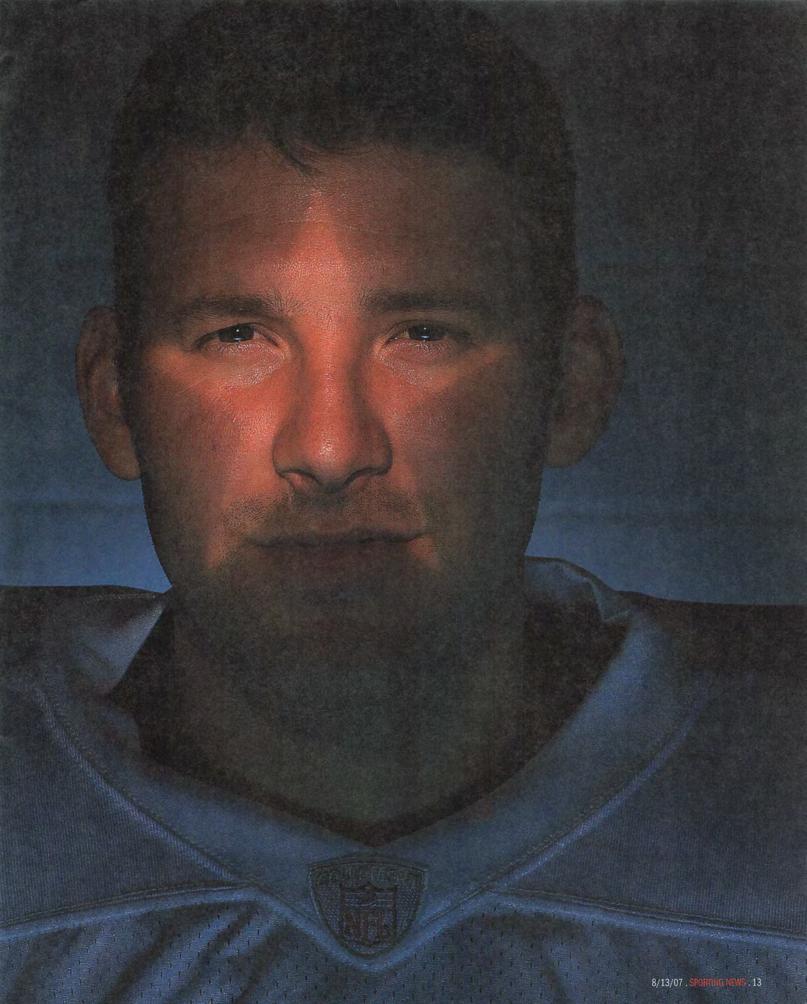
Such is life as the Cowboys starting quarterback, a job that can lift you up or eat you alive.

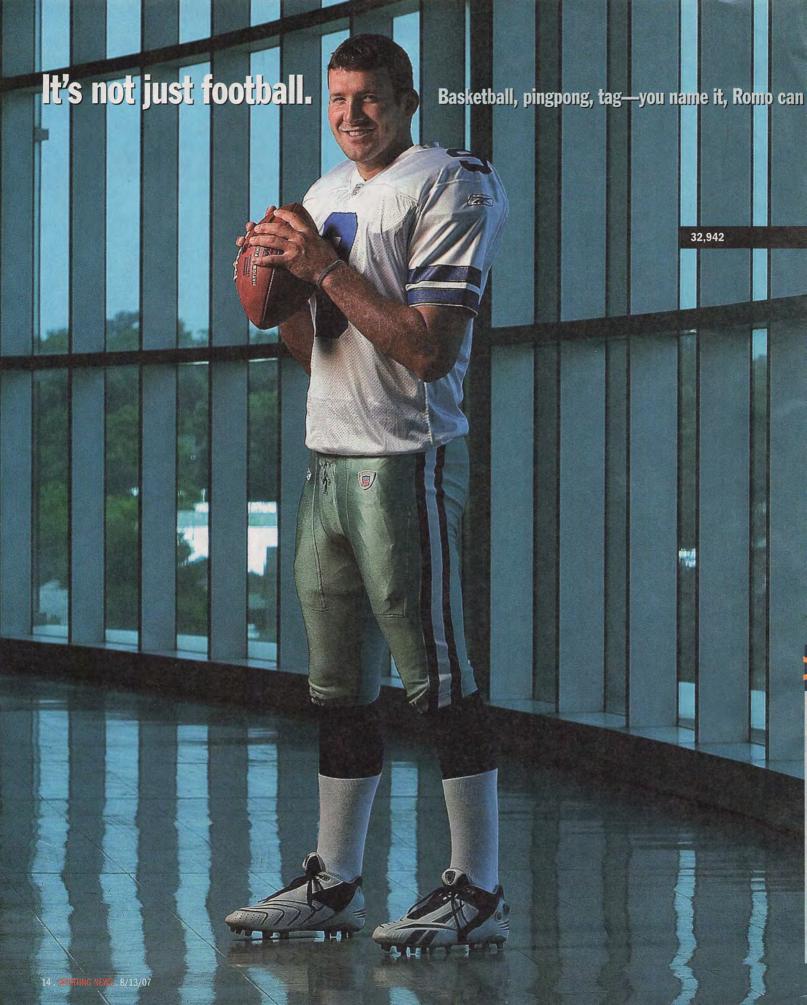


ony Romo is the great blue-and-white hope.

The Dallas Cowboys are a proud franchise. Their fans have long been treated to greatness, and they demand nothing less. Their heroes are best whispered in reverence—Tom Landry, Roger Staubach, Tony Dorsett, Emmitt Smith, Troy Aikman. But it has been a rough stretch for America's Team. Dallas hasn't won a playoff game since beating Minnesota in 1996, and the 'Boys' postseason losses since then have been to the Panthers (twice), the Cardinals, the Vikings and the Seahawks (we'll get back to this one ...). Those teams have combined to win exactly zero Super Bowls. That doesn't sit well with the team's ultracompetitive owner, Jerry Jones. At all.

Which is why the ultracompetitive Romo might be just the guy to eventually lead the Cowboys to their sixth Super Bowl ring. The list of quarterback failures since Aikman retired after the 2000 season is long and





A farewell to arms This is what Tony Romo is up against. From 1969 to 2000, the Cowboys basically had three quarterbacks-Roger Staubach, Danny White and oeat you at it. Troy Aikman. Since then, it has been a hodgepodge of talent and brains, a collection of frustrating players who showed only occasional flashes of brilliance amid long stretches of futility. Passing yards **Touchdowns** Roger Staubach 153 22,700 84-29* (2 Super Bowl wins) **Danny White** 21,959 155 62-30 **Troy Aikman** 165 94-71 (3 Super Bowl wins) **Anthony Wright** *Record as a starter 529 1-2 **Clint Stoerner** 314 athleticism to move around and 1-1 make things happen. Because of Ryan Leaf 494 that, at times, he's able to make big 0-3 plays. But that's also been his biggest **Chad Hutchinson** 1,563 weakness so far-knowing when to 2-7 take a chance." **Quincy Carter** 5.839 ■ His feel for the game. "He's got 16-15 a great instinct about him," Witten **Vinny Testaverde** says. "He sees things before they 3,532 17 5-10 open up, and that's the biggest **Drew Henson** attribute he's got. And he's got a lot 78 1-0 of confidence in making those **Drew Bledsoe** throws." 4,803 30 12-10 ■ His work ethic. "What's most impressive to me about him is his desire to be a good football player," offensive coordinator Jason Garrett says. "He painful for Dallas fans-Quincy Carter, Drew Henson, Chad Hutchinson, Vinny Testaverde comes in, he's ready to work. He gets dialed in at and Drew Bledsoe, to name a few. "I don't think practice and really focuses. And in order to be a there's any question that if you're not winning good player at that position in this league, you and you're not successful as the quarterback in have to do that. He's willing to do that, and he's Dallas, it's not a real glamorous position to be working hard at doing that." in," Aikman says. "But if you're able to win and But really, all those strengths can be traced to play well and add to the legacy of the franchise, one source: his insatiable desire to win. Garrett, I think it's the most special place you can posin his first season on the job with the Cowboys, This is ... Tony Romo sibly play." calls Romo a natural competitor. And it's not So why in the world would Romo, a kid who just in football. Basketball, pingpong, tag-you Favorite movie: The Natural. signed with the team in 2003 as an undrafted name it, Romo can beat you at it. Much has Favorite TV show: 24. free agent out of Eastern Illinois, be the one to been made of his ability as a golfer, and with Favorite actor: Christian Bale. lead the franchise back to the promised land? good reason. Romo has attempted to qualify for Favorite actress: "Oh, God, this will start The reasons are many. the U.S. Open three times—he fired an even-par up another controversy. Let's see. ... I don't His accurate arm and quick release. "It 72 at a 2007 local qualifying tournament but know who my favorite actress is. I like a lot of failed to make the cut for the sectional roundkeeps the defenders off," tight end Jason Witten says. "He's able to throw it into tight spots that and the EDS Byron Nelson Championship Favorite golfer: Jack Nicklaus (all-time); other people aren't because he's got that quick twice. Golf, though, is nothing special to Romo. Tiger Woods and Steve Stricker (current). release and he's able to get it out so fast." It's just something else that gives him a chance On the iPhone: "I'm not really into the ■ His mobility. "With Tony, he's always to win. "I enjoy competition," he says. "If I can technological world as of yet, but I am with AT&T, so I think I'll get one eventually. I'll have moving in the pocket, so you have to be aware," compete each day, I have more fun." to have someone set it up for me, though." center Andre Gurode says. "He's going to create Favorite off-field activity: "Anything a lot of plays with his feet, but at the same time

you have to stay with your blocks because you

His knack for big plays. "He has the ability

to create when there's not plays there or when

guys are covered," Aikman says. "He's got the

never know where he's going to be."

that's competitive. Tag would be fun, but also

Three words to describe the Miss

Universe pageant (he was a judge): "Out

anything that's related to sports, too."

of my league. That's four words. Sorry."

fter watching stone-footed Drew Bledsoe get sacked 65 times in his 22 games with Dallas, most Cowboys fans would have agreed that it was high time Romo got his chance to compete on the biggest stage every Sunday. He finally appeared





Cowboys fans have seen the good Romo—five TD passes against the Bucs—and the bad Romo—the muffed hold against Seattle—but they've yet to see the consistent Romo. With an offseason to prepare for his first season as the Cowboys' starter, Romo hopes to change that.



'I've been in camp with Jim Kelly and John Elway, and he approaches it the same

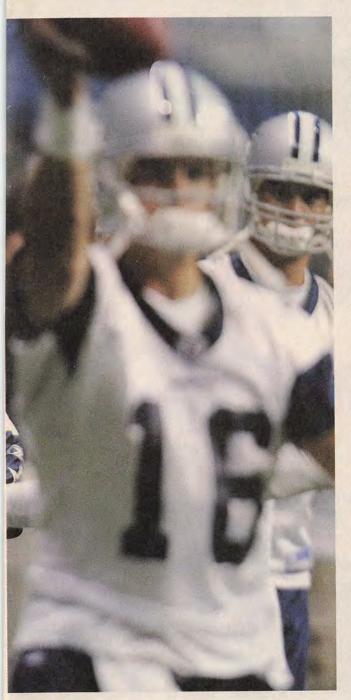
on the national radar last season, but he's not exactly a fresh-faced rookie. This is Romo's fifth training camp with the Cowboys. The only difference is he's the starter this time around. Not that you'd know it's his first time in the role.

"He knows he's the starter. I've been in camp with Jim Kelly and John Elway, and he approaches it the same way they did. He's the starter. He takes charge and is in control out there, and I see that as a positive," new coach Wade Phillips says.

As a backup, Romo's primary training camp focus was more selfish in nature. It had to be because if he ever wanted to get on the field, he had to focus on beating out the guy in front of him. Every year, he'd go back to the basics with his throwing mechanics, examining what worked and what needed work, driven by the thought that there always was a way to improve his release or strengthen his arm. He spent his time on footwork, dropping back and recognizing coverages. His attitude was, and still is, that he was going to work as hard as he could and let the chips fall where they may. "The people who are best under pressure are the ones who have done it a million times," he says.

"That's what you try and do—throw five or six days a week and put yourself in a position where you've practiced that specific throw enough times. If I've done it before, usually I'm better at it."

Now, he's the starter and his entire thought process has changed. Now, it's team, team, team. He talks with the offensive linemen and learns the motivations and thought processes behind why they do what they do. He jokes with Terrell Owens and helps the team's young receivers work on their routes and tendencies. He throws his two cents in just about every way he can, and



way they did.' -New Cowboys coach Wade Phillips

he has learned to be receptive when other players have suggestions. Building those giveand-take relationships is part of the job, part of his maturation as a team leader.

Romo has a few things to prove to his fans and his franchise. He started out last season like a ball of fire but finished it seemingly frozen in ice. The Cowboys, who opened the season an uninspiring 3-3, went 5-1 in Romo's first six starts after he replaced Bledsoe. Romo completed 68.9 percent of his passes in that stretch and threw 10 touchdowns against just four interceptions. His 306-yard, five-TD perform-

ance against Tampa Bay was one of the best games of the year by any quarterback. He was selected to the Pro Bowl on the strength of those first six games despite throwing as many interceptions as touchdown passes in the final four games of the regular season.

But the regular season is not necessarily what football fans think of when they think of Tony Romo. The lasting impression, fair or not, is of that botched snap with 1:19 left in the wild-card game against Seattle. If Romo handles the snap, Martin Gramatica almost certainly makes the 19-yard field goal and Dallas moves into the next round. As every Dallas fan knows, though, he didn't handle the snap, and the fans, players and coaches had the offseason to stew about what might have been. "Either you can handle it as an athlete or a person or you can't," Romo says. "For me, I always knew I would be OK after the loss. I just felt bad for my teammates, the organization and the fans. And you never know, maybe you look back one day and say that's something that spurred you on to a special season."

The right pieces certainly seem to be there in Big D. Romo has a solid line in front of him, and veteran wide receivers Owens and Terry Glenn are complemented by a group of talented, but unproven, youngsters. The two-headed monster of tailbacks Julius Jones and Marion Barber has helped establish the leaguewide trend of using two backs to shoulder the rushing load. Phillips was hired by Jerry Jones because of his success as a defensive coordinator, and he'll install a much more aggressive, attacking approach.

The key, though, is Romo. A good season from him will allow the Cowboys to finally make noise in the

playoffs. Won't hurt his chances of getting a long-term contract, either. "I think this early half of the season is going to be critical for him," Aikman says. "Right now, the Cowboys haven't extended his contract, and I think there's a wait-and-see attitude with the Cowboys following and there's also a wait-and-see attitude within the organization itself. If he gets off to a good start, I think a lot of things are going to fall into place for him. If he starts off poorly, there's even going to be added pressure for him to get it turned around."

A competition, eh? Just let him at it.

Urban Cowboy

Suddenly, everything Tony Romo did was news.

His are-they-dating, aren't-they-dating relationship with country singer Carrie Underwood was gossip-page gold. He was a celebrity judge at the Miss Universe pageant in Mexico. He became a YouTube legend when he joined the band Metal Skool and the guy who played Mr. Belding on Saved By The Bell for a rendition of Journey's "Don't Stop Believing" at a club on the Sunset Strip in Hollywood.

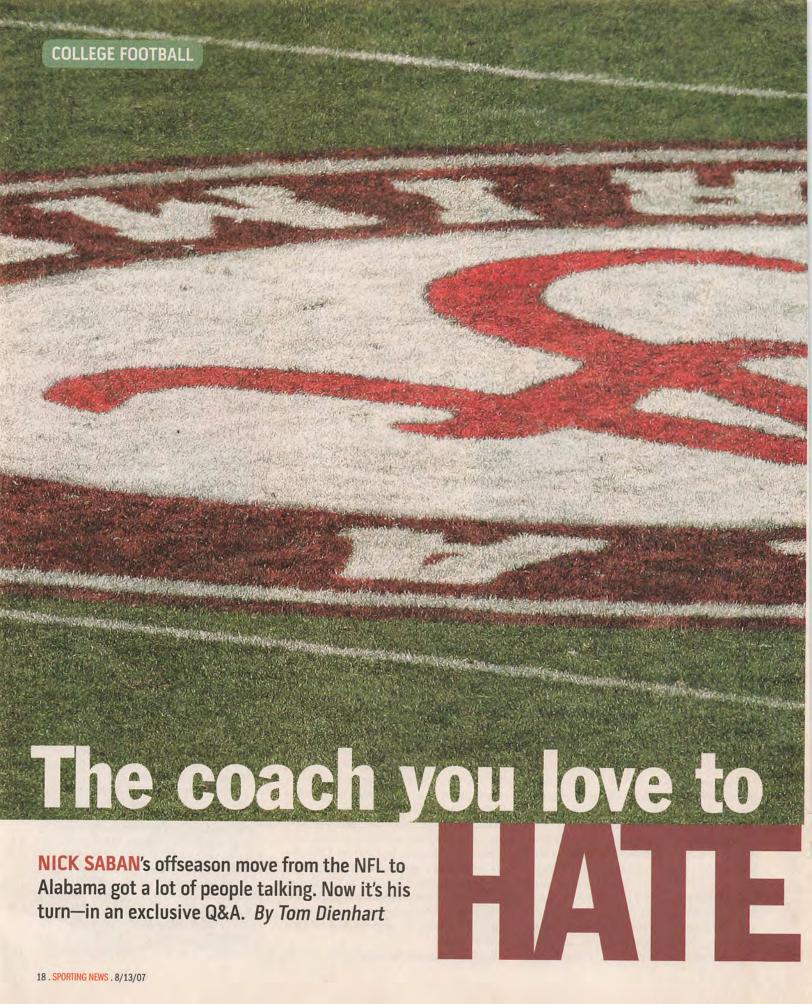
Last year, nobody cared where Romo spent weeks at a time. This year, his daily trips gained national attention and provided ammunition for critics and fans everywhere who wondered if his newfound celebrity had gone to his head. "He was very visible this offseason because of what he was able to do

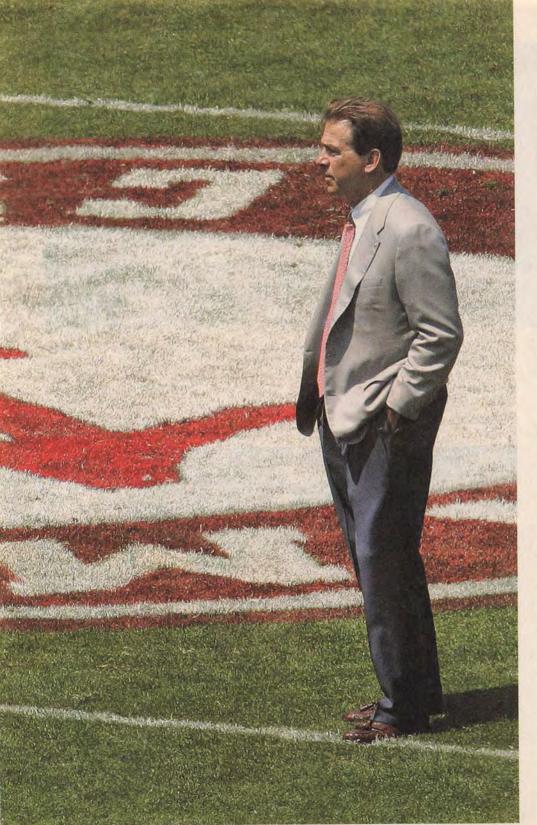


Showing up at the CMAs as Underwood's date certainly didn't slow the rumor mill.

last year, and he took advantage of a lot of those things," says Cowboys Hall of Famer Troy Aikman, who, by the way, is not one of those critics. "I don't think that'll impact—in fact, I know it won't—whatever happens to him this year, positive or negative. But I do believe that, for a young player, when you are out there publicly as much as he was this past offseason, you open yourself up for scrutiny."

That scrutiny is part of being the quarterback of the Cowboys. Romo knows it and says he rests easy at night knowing he did more to prepare for this season than he ever has before. "I understand that if you're on television, they think you're out doing all kinds of things," he says. "But for that one day I'm out, the other six I'm working at football. It's just who I am. I feel like you reap what you sow, and if you put forth the effort and the time, you give yourself the best chance to succeed."





espected and revered ... reviled and repulsed. Welcome to Nick Saban's world.

Love him or hate him, no one will ignore Saban this fall. In fact, he'll be watched more closely than any coach as he tries to feed the Alabama football beast that has eaten up four coaches this decade.

Saban's marching orders are simple: Deliver the

school's first national championship since 1992.

Anything less will be considered a failure for a coach who was lured from the Miami Dolphins with an eight-year, \$32 million guaranteed contract that shook the bricks of every ivory tower on every campus.

Days before the start of camp, Sporting News sat down with Saban in his Tuscaloosa office for an interview on topics including Alabama's

'People questioned my integrity. But I was not trying to mislead anybody.'

clandestine courtship, his bruised image and expectations for this season.

Is Saban a monster, or is he misunderstood? You be the judge.

SN: Why has your image taken a beating?

SABAN: I take responsibility. I just think who I am is different than who I'm perceived to be. But I also think I'm responsible for that. How you think you are, and how everyone perceives you, is everyone's blind spot. It's what you don't know about yourself. My wife tells me that all of the time.

And for most of us who aren't in the public, you don't even realize how you're perceived. But in a public job, you realize it because you get feedback from the media and other people.

SN: When did you start getting a negative persona?

SABAN: The whole thing about coming here became such a national deal. The way I handled it, people questioned my integrity. But I was not trying to mislead anybody. I was trying to do a fair and honest thing for our team by being loyal to them, which I was. When the season was over, I turned and looked at our family and talked about what we were going to do next, if we were going to do something different.

SN: Do you think people are afraid of you?

SABAN: I do sense it, and I don't like it. I have no idea why they're afraid of me. I think a lot of it is the image that has been created publicly. I'm not blaming anyone for that. I don't think it's really how I am. I think the people who know me and get to know me don't think I'm that way at all. I'm a shy kid from West Virginia who grew up in a coal mining town pumping gas, and I still feel the same way. I'm the same kind of person as that. I don't treat people any different, I don't talk any different.

SN: What's your biggest weakness?

SABAN: I'm a driven perfectionist who has a high expectation for what we want to try to accomplish. It's not easy. A lot of people look at what they are doing and don't expect it to be hard. And they get discouraged when things get difficult. But most things, in my opinion, that are significant to accomplish are hard. But that's what makes it great.

Woody Hayes once said there can be no great victories in life without a tremendous amount of adversity. The war in the Pacific is the greatest

This is ... Nick Saban

Favorite snack: Little Debbie oatmeal cookies. I eat two each morning. I have to have them. I don't know why. I've been eating them for years.

Movies: I'm not much for comedies. I like old Clint Eastwood films. I also like Saving Private Ryan, The Last Samurai and Seabiscuit.

Books: I don't read novels or for pleasure, but I like to read to learn—whether about a conservation easement on a stream in north Georgia or a way to be positive and motivate people.

Working hours: I get in at 7 a.m. or a little before and go home at 10-ish. I don't eat dinner, and I eat lunch on the go. I do everything here. I never leave here.

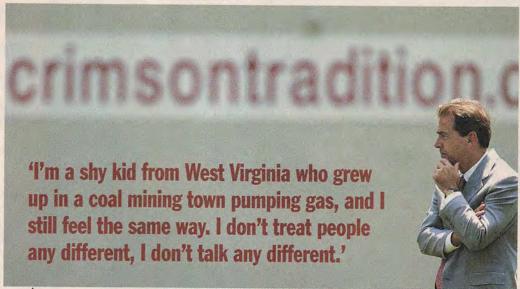
Family: I enjoy spending time with my kids (20-year-old Nicholas and 16-year-old Kristen), but I don't spend a lot of time with them. A lot of it is that this is not a family-friendly job. This is a way of life, especially coaching in college. You have to learn how to manage your life. One of the reasons we bought a summer house in Georgia on the lake was so we all could go there as a family; that month or three weeks we could spend there together was great. That has been a real positive thing in my relationship with my kids. We learn how to wakeboard together—you pull them on tubes and they get mad at you because you dump them. There's a lot of fun in it all.

Going out in public: I prefer going to a movie instead of a restaurant. You are on the move, and seldom does anyone bother you if you go to a movie. At a restaurant, you're in closer quarters, it's more inviting for people to talk to you. I enjoy the people, but if you don't want to be bothered, you better not go to certain places. I don't mind it, but it affects the people around you.

Cars: I love the old muscle cars. And I really like the old Jaguars. But I don't have any classic cars. I almost bought one once. I drive a Mercedes now. It's what they give me.

Days as a player at Kent State: I was OK. The MAC was a good league. I was a good team guy. I wasn't the biggest guy in the world, and I wasn't outstanding. I was happy with my career. I started three years, and I also played baseball. But I couldn't hit that low, outside slider. I still can see those weak ground balls to second base in my sleep.

Biggest career disappointment: It would have to be when I didn't get the Kent State job. I was defensive coordinator at Michigan State. We had just won the Rose Bowl and had a great defense. That was my alma mater, and for the first time I really thought I had a chance to be a head coach. I didn't get the job. I was devastated. I told my wife, Terry, that I should get out of this profession. I've worked all of these years so hard, tried to be the best recruiter, best coach, best teacher so I would have the opportunity to be a head coach. And I can't even get the job at my alma mater, which wasn't even viewed as a good job.

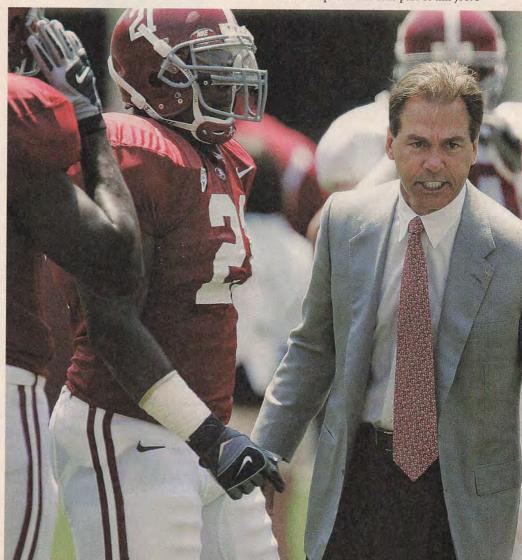


military victory of all time because of Pearl Harbor and what we had to overcome. But if you're always seeking everything to be easy, then you aren't going to be happy being around me.

SN: How will you insulate yourself from the outside forces that seem to hamper Alabama coaches?

SABAN: Everything is about winning. Whether the coach was available to these people as much as they wanted him to be, whether they had the access to him that they wanted, they all got hired or fired based on winning and losing.

I don't want to sound glib, but I like people. And I like the public relations part of this job. I



just know that you can't let it overwhelm you. And none of the parameters I have here are different from anywhere else. It just wasn't public. And I always did more than what I agreed to do.

SN: So your time is sacred?

SABAN: I try to protect the time I think you need to spend on coaching your players, developing your players and recruiting to have a chance to be successful. The people at LSU had a tremendous amount of respect for: That guy's the coach and that's what we want. They didn't care about you playing golf outings in Louisiana. I only played in two the whole time I was there. I've already played in six here and turned down 50 others, and no one seemed to get it. Well, how can I go recruit and do the things I need to do when you have me doing all of this stuff?

SN: Much has been made over the fact you don't have a buyout in your contract. Why is there none?

SABAN: I never had a buyout at LSU or Michigan State. I think the buyout is: They want you and they pay you well, so I do have a buyout. I have an eight-year contract, and everyone knows what it is. That's a buyout. I'm getting positively rewarded for my efforts rather than

having to stay here because I would be negatively penalized if I ever tried to leave. SN: Did you talk to any former Alabama coaches when you took the job?

> SABAN: I talked to coach (Gene) Stallings because I have a lot of respect for him as a person. We had a little similar path. You hear so much about this place. I told him: Tell me what it's like. Do you have an opportunity to be successful here? You hear all this stuff about it. I can't imagine it has to be that way. He was extremely positive about the place, the people of Alabama, the university, what you can accomplish here. He told me about the recruiting in the state. The one piece of advice is that the people in the state are special and to give back to them every way you can.

SN: What are your expectations for the season?

SABAN: I really can't say what a realistic expectation is this year because we're still learning about our team. We taught the base offense and defense during 15 practices in the spring. We still are learning a lot about our players and chemistry. What I always like to say is it's not what it could be, it's not what it should be, it's not what it was-it's what it is. We have to build on it and make it better.

And if you have expectations that we are going to win the national championship this year, and you're going to be all frustrated if we don't, then you don't have the right spirit. You have to have an expectation that's realistic because there's work to be done to get to where we want to go. SN

Big names, big pressure

Four more coaches who will be under a hot spotlight this season:

Bobby Bowden, Florida State. No coach received as much offseason scrutiny as Saint Bobby, who made headlines by reshaping his staff. Among the painful moves: nudging out his son, offensive coordinator Jeff Bowden. This is seen by many as a last resort for the legendary Bowden, who is coming off a 7-6 season that had some big-money insiders calling for his ouster. That reconfigured offensive staff will be counted on to kick-start what has been a moribund attack. But is the talent up to snuff?



Lloyd Carr, Michigan. There's talk that this may be Carr's last season. That scuttlebutt grew in '06, when Carr's contract was reworded to state he would receive deferred compensation if he remained employed at the university in any fashion. Before, he had to be employed as a coach to collect the loot. Despite all of his critics, Carr not only has maintained the program's high standard, but he also has a national title to his credit. The Wolverines are the favorites in the Big Ten and could be motivated to send Carr out on a high note with a league and national championship.

Les Miles, LSU. Let's call him the Mouth of the South. Maybe Miles is feeling the pressure of never having won a title of any sort in his two years in Baton Rouge despite playing with a loaded roster. Miles took verbal jabs at predecessor Nick Saban after Saban was hired by Alabama. "We have a new rival

in f— Alabama." Miles wasn't done, teeing off on Southern California and the Pac-10. "I can tell you this, that they have a much easier road to travel. They're going to play real knock-down drag-outs with UCLA and Washington, Cal-Berkeley, Stanford—some real juggernauts." Let's just say that if Miles, whose Tigers are the preseason pick to win the SEC, doesn't deliver, changes could be brewing at LSU.

Houston Nutt, Arkansas. No coach endured a rockier offseason-Nutt dealt with the turmoil of player transfers, questions about dubious text messaging and fan unrest. Regardless, Nutt is still standing. But for how long? He has flirted with bolting Arkansas in the past. And, with growing unrest and athletic director Frank Broyles' pending retirement, this may be Nutt's last stand despite coming off an SEC West title.

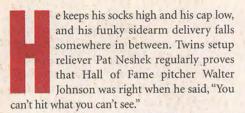


Special delivery

MLB

Whether it's mesmerizing hitters with his sidearm motion or connecting with fans through the wired world, Twins reliever PAT NESHEK is leaving quite an impression *By Pat Borzi*





Neshek, a 26-year-old righthander from the Minneapolis suburb of Brooklyn Park, has been baffling hitters and piling up strikeouts-114 in 892/3 career innings—since getting called up last July by his home team. He has been one of the best late-inning relievers in baseball this season, posting a 6-1 record with a 2.05 ERA and allowing

26 hits in 522/3 innings. As he begins his motion, the

6-3 Neshek bends low as if

emulating the knuckle-

scraping delivery of Orioles reliever Chad Bradford. But Neshek releases the ball higher than Bradford, and picking it up in the blur of his arms and legs is tough for hitters-and catchers. When warming up Neshek at the Metrodome, backup catcher Mike Redmond shoos Twins infielders from the mound, fearful of losing a pitch in a white jersey.

"They've got to move so I don't wear one," Redmond says.

Neshek finishes each pitch by bringing his right hand high, and he frequently pumps a fist after strikeouts. One such celebration drew a glare from Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter.

"That's just him," Twins pitching coach Rick Anderson says. "He's goofy, but it's not intended to show anybody up. He may look like he's out of control, but he's got a plan."

The windup ... and the pitch

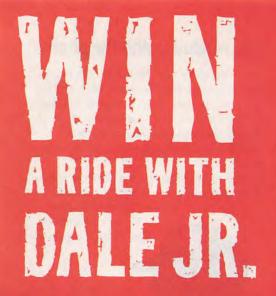
Batting in his final high school game, the switch-hitting Neshek blocked a pitch with his right arm. The impact left a lump on the inside of his forearm-a lump he still has-and caused searing pain in his wrist whenever he threw.

"I don't know if a vein exploded or what," Neshek says.

Even a specialist wasn't sure what was wrong. But while playing for a summer league team in

Kansas City, Neshek discovered he could throw sidearm without pain-

Photos by Albert Dickson / SN





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and with better movement and deception. Even after he could throw without discomfort several months later, Neshek stuck with the new arm angle. Three years later, after setting Butler University records for strikeouts in a game (18), season and career, he was drafted in the sixth round by the Twins, who had taken Neshek in the 45th round coming out of high school a few years earlier.

A harder thrower than most sidearmers, Neshek delivers a low-90s fastball, a slider and a changeup from the same four-seam grip. He added the change this year to better handle lefties, who hit .244 against him in 2006, compared with .140 by righties. Now, lefthanders (.132 average) are hitting worse against him than righthanders (.160).

Another oddity: When working from the windup, Neshek slides his plant foot from the third base side to the first base side of the rubber before he releases the ball, defying just about every rule of balance and mechanics. "I haven't seen anyone do that," Anderson says.

Neshek didn't even realize he does this until early July when he heard Yankees announcers talking about it on a replay telecast. From the stretch, Neshek's foot hugs the first base side.

No one in the Twins' organization has tampered with Neshek's delivery. "That was always something I was worried about when they drafted me," Neshek says, "but not a word was said."

The batter's eye

After taking a strike and a ball from Neshek in a July 17 game, Tigers third baseman Brandon Inge turned to catcher Joe Mauer and said, "It's impossible to pick up a release point from this guy. You've got to be kidding me."

Inge grounded into an inning-ending force play. That was the only time in five career atbats against Neshek that Inge hadn't struck out.

"You can't see the ball until it's 10 feet from you," Inge says. "So my approach is, presume

Shining in the shadows

Like the Twins' Pat Neshek, these relievers are usually gone by closing time but quietly have a big say in their teams' success.

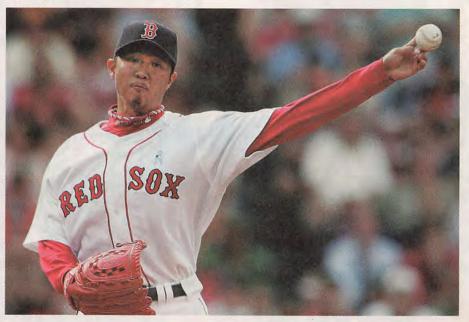
Rafael Betancourt, Indians. You had better be ready to hit your way on against Betancourt, who has walked four in 51% innings. Alas, foes are hitting .172 against him.

Ryan Franklin, Cardinals. When he was a starter with the Mariners, the best thing you could say about Franklin was he ate innings. (The worst: He was 23-44 from 2003-05.) As a middleman with the Reds and Phillies, he was middling. As the setup man for Jason Isringhausen, Franklin has been sparkling (4-1, 1.45 ERA).

Hideki Okajima, Red Sox. It was Okajima—and not his more celebrated countryman Daisuke Matsuzaka—who made the All-Star team as a Red Sox rookie.

Tony Pena, Diamondbacks. His ERA (1.98) and opponents' batting average (.184) stack up favorably against closer Jose Valverde's (2.80, .184).

Scot Shields, Angels. He hit a rough patch after the All-Star break—five earned runs in a week after allowing three in May and June combined—but he has been handing leads to Francisco Rodriguez for years. —*Kyle Veltrop*



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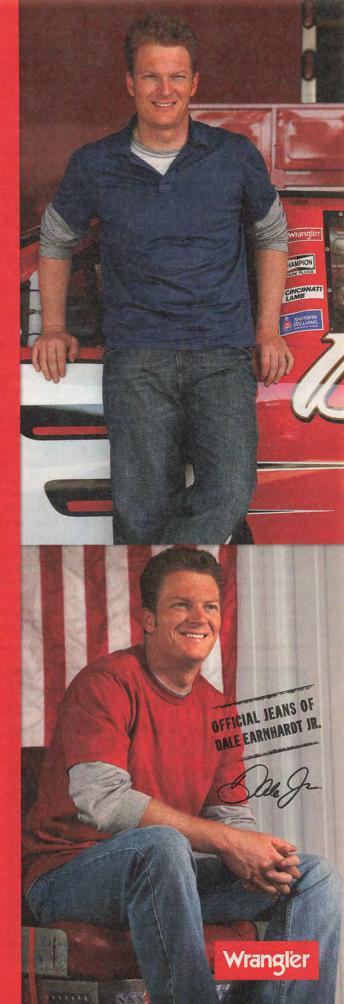
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he's going to be in the strike zone and start your swing in the strike zone. When you pick up the ball, then you make the adjustment."

In the same game, Tigers catcher Pudge Rodriguez tried doing that and swung through three sliders. The next night, after again striking out on three pitches, Rodriguez flipped the bat in his hands as he walked back to the dugout.

"Usually you find some little thing in a guy's delivery that's your trigger, and that's how you start making contact," Inge says. "With him, we haven't quite figured it out yet."

At spring training in 2006, Torii Hunter and Rondell White took a look at Neshek throwing batting practice and refused to get in the cage against him. Minor leaguer Tommy Watkins gave it a try. Neshek drilled him in the kneecap.

"Now you see why I didn't want to hit off him," Hunter says.

A true web gem

A college roommate and teammate, Paul Beck, introduced Neshek to the world of collecting autographs and memorabilia while they were at Butler. Beck knew which hotels to stake out when teams and bands came to Indianapolis. Among Neshek's best scores: getting Allen Iverson to sign a baseball, the only item Neshek had with him at the time.

In the spring of 2004, he created "On The Road With Pat Neshek," a website (PatNeshek.com) used to communicate with other collectors and "graphers."

By 2006, his blog had grown so popular that Neshek won an Internet vote for a spot on the International League All-Star team. And after a spirited campaign to land on this year's A.L. All-Star team, he finished third behind Boston's Hideki Okajima and Detroit's Jeremy Bonderman.

Neshek's blog posts offer glimpses into the life of a major leaguer. But it's his regular-guy mentality that makes him so endearing. Most afternoons before batting practice, Neshek can be found at his locker showing off baseball cards to teammates or answering mail.

The essence of Neshek can be summarized in this post: "I wake up each day and can't believe how I got here and am thankful to even touch the uniform! If I wasn't playing baseball I would probably be the guy who was coming home from work and planning a night around baseball ... what games to go to, which minor league games to get autographs, which guy to take on my fantasy team ..."

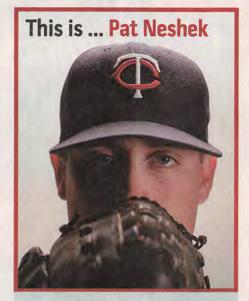
Neshek's teammates understand his passion. When Jason Tyner hit his first major league homer on July 28, after more than 1,200 career at-bats, he cracked that Neshek may have already sold the ball on eBay before the game ended.

Neshek's website also offers Twins items for sale or trade. Outfielder Michael Cuddyer once exchanged an autographed glove for a Michael Jordan-signed basketball. And Johan Santana swapped a dozen autographed balls for 50 signed by Hall of Famers like Nolan Ryan and Satchel Paige.

"That was unbelievable," Neshek says. "I was like, 'Don't I get a finder's fee?'"

Neshek's web savvy doesn't just benefit his teammates. He had to wear a witch's costume as part of a rookie prank last season, and he later sold the getup on eBay for \$252. He donated the money to Pets In Distress, a Florida animal shelter where Neshek and his wife, Stephanee, adopted their dog Juicy.

It's clear that Neshek's sidearm delivery isn't the only thing that makes him unorthodox. SN



Favorite TV show: The Simpsons or Beavis and Butt-Head.

Favorite road city: Milwaukee. "I hate the road. I don't really like too many other places."

Favorite kind of restaurant: Vietnamese or Chinese.

Favorite website, other than his own: eBav.

Most prized autograph: Kirby Puckett's, on a baseball. "I was 5 years old. He lived in my hometown, and he was doing (a signing) at a car dealership."

Autograph I wish I had: Christy Mathewson's.

Best thing about living in Minnesota: "Clean air, clean water, very exercise-friendly, lots of outdoor stuff to do."

If not playing baseball, I would be: A financial adviser.

Last CD listened to: "Mutter," by Rammstein, a German metal band.



The blog days of summer

Want to know what's on the mind of a big leaguer? Fire up your laptop and find out ... **John Lackey, Angels.** Say this for the big guy—he doesn't hold back: "Tampa has a great clubhouse. They have some of the best food in the league, but the stadium sucks. ... We leave today for Minnesota so we get two really bad ones on this trip."

> yardbarker.com/users/John_Lackey

Curt Schilling, Red Sox. Yeah, so he may not be your favorite player, but his blog is updated regularly and it's comprehensive. His blow-by-blow accounts of his starts for Class AAA Pawtucket gave Sox fans an inside look at his rehab.

> 38pitches.com

Akinori Otsuka, Rangers. First a disclaimer: You have to be able to read Japanese.

> aspara.co.jp/aki-otsuka/

Curtis Granderson, Tigers. Granderson talks ball, answers questions ("Do you believe in UFOs?") and discusses whatever is on his mind. Food is a favorite subject. A recent post: "Even though we didn't play well (in Anaheim), I did get a chance to experience Del Taco. Marcus Thames and Craig Monroe didn't like it as much as I did, but part of that could have been because they ordered cheeseburgers. (That's) like going to McDonald's and trying to order a taco." Well, yeah.

> sports.espn.go.com/espn/blog/main

While most of the heavyweights merely fiddled, the Braves and Red Sox were blazing a trail to postseason success.

The trade winds blew, but few got carried away

By Kyle Veltrop

kveltrop@sportingnews.com

en Griffey is still a Red, Jermaine Dye's Sox still are white, and Dontrelle Willis will still deal in teal.

Last week's nonwaiver trading deadline didn't cause the transaction wire to go haywire, but that doesn't mean it lacked significance. A look at the deadline headlines indicates it's more accurate to color baseball's annual swapfest in a shade of gray.

Braves add beef to the lineup, fire to the 'pen

The Braves clearly were the biggest winners, landing two of the three hottest commodities that were moved. If the postseason started today, Atlanta wouldn't even be playing. But that doesn't mean this club won't represent the N.L. in the World Series. The addition of Mark Teixeira gives the Braves the best head-to-toe lineup in the league—one that can hit for average and power—and seriously upgrades the team at its weakest position. (Julio Franco? Really?) Teixeira also is the best defensive first baseman in his new league.

Octavio Dotel gives the Braves another lateinning relief option and provides a safety net for erratic closer Bob Wickman. If Rafael Soriano has indeed straightened himself out, then the bullpen now will be a strength. The Braves could have used another starter, but you could do much worse than having John Smoltz and Tim Hudson at the top of the rotation.

Go ahead, make a better case for another N.L. team.

The best-in-baseball Red Sox add the most coveted pitcher on the market

Eric Gagne isn't what he once was, but Jonathan Papelbon is a reasonable facsimile of the old Gagne. That means the new Gagne can focus on being a setup man—one who throws 94 mph and has a wicked changeup. There were questions about whether Gagne would waive his no-trade clause if he couldn't close, but he put winning a championship ahead of pitching in the ninth inning. In fact, during his 8-minute



Gagne obviously entertained championship thoughts after his trade to the Red Sox.

introductory news conference, Gagne said "World Series" seven times (the *Boston Globe* counted).

Now, imagine a cool October night in Boston, and the Sox can send out Josh Beckett,

Gagne and Papelbon in succession. Also remember that the Sox had the best ERA in the A.L. on July 31 and neither Curt Schilling nor Gagne was pitching for them. Both are now.

Yankees swap middle reliever for bench help

A year ago, the Yanks were, again, getting cursed for landing a big deadline package from the Phillies that included Bobby Abreu. This year, all the Yankees did was add Wilson Betemit, a .231-hitting utility infielder, for

pitcher Scott Proctor. Even more strange, there wasn't all that much talk swirling around the Yankees leading up to the deadline. That's not such a bad thing.

It's also not bad that only the Rangers came close to holding a fire sale. Teams all over baseball are thinking of late-season surges and asking, "Why not us?" After the Yankees-dominated 1990s, people screamed for parity, for giving everyone a chance. Well, here it is.

Heavyweights largely stand pat at deadline

The Mets added second baseman Luis Castillo, and the Indians got outfielder Kenny Lofton. They are nice players but aren't what they once were.

The Tigers and Angels stood pat. Detroit is hoping Joel Zumaya's pending return will fix its bullpen. The Angels are hoping they can overcome their lack of power with a whole bunch of line drives.

And standing pat may not be such a bad thing. The Cardinals won the World Series last year without making a significant move at the trading deadline. The White Sox added only Geoff

Blum in '05 and went on to win it all.

Conventional wisdom says the Red Sox and Braves significantly helped their chances in October, but that's a month when conventional wisdom often means bunk.

Coming attractions

The skinny on four of the prospects who were moved before the nonwaiver trading deadline:

C Drew Butera and OF Dustin Martin, Twins. Butera and Martin, who were acquired in the Luis Castillo deal with the Mets, are long-range prospects. But Twins G.M. Terry Ryan likes Butera's defense and Martin's power potential.

OF Engel Beltre, Rangers. He was believed to be the key to the deal that sent Eric Gagne to the Red Sox. *Baseball America* wrote last winter that Beltre's "lean body and tools have elicited comparisons to Barry Bonds and Darryl Strawberry." But Beltre is just 17.

SS Elvis Andrus, Rangers. He's the most highly touted of the four prospects who came with catcher Jarrod Saltalamacchia in the Mark Teixeira deal. He is raw—he doesn't turn 19 until August 26—but has good speed and could develop some power. Andrus played in July's Futures Game.

BLOG ALERT

'If it's not annoying to say a player who started in the All-Star Game deserves more recognition, Placido Polanco deserves more recognition.'

Matt Crossman makes a case for the Tigers' second baseman at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

Here's to Alex Rodriguez for becoming the youngest player to reach 500 homers. But if you're looking for the real Yankees of the moment, they're Robinson Cano and Hideki Matsui, whose ridiculous starts to the second half have the Yankees pointed toward, yep, October baseball again.

Derrek Lee has a higher batting average and Alfonso Soriano has more home runs, but the Cubs' MVP is Aramis Ramirez.

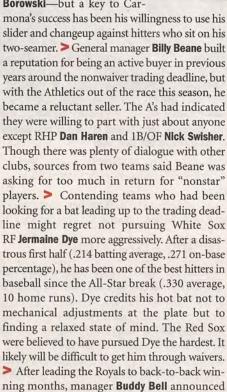
Six-foot, 185 pounds-not impressive, An 80-something-mph fastball-not impressive. Three hundred wins when you are 6-foot, 185 pounds and throw an 80-something-mph fastball-impressive.



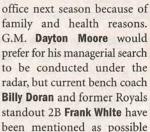
Rodriguez has plenty of reason to celebrate-he finally hit 500, and his Yankees could be headed for the playoffs.



A dominant month of July (5-1, 1.74 ERA) helped Indians RHP Fausto Carmona enter the A.L. Cy Young race. His hard sinker has become one of the best pitches in the game-"The guy is throwing 97 mph with sink. He's filthy," says closer Joe Borowski-but a key to Car-



he would move from the dugout to the front



successors to Bell. Both know how to develop young players, which is a key requirement. Doran has been part of the team's turnaround this year and has helped many of the players. White, now a senior adviser with the team, managed several current Royals-including 3B Alex Gordon and DH Billy Butler-in the minors. Because of Moore's ties to the Atlanta organization, Braves hitting coach Terry Pendleton also would make sense. He has had great results working with young hitters in recent seasons, including RF Jeff Francoeur, C Brian McCann and 1B Adam LaRoche, who now is with the Pirates. > When the Tigers opened the second half with a 9-12 record, a popular explanation was that the struggles were caused in part by 18 road games during that 21-game stretch. But Detroit has been better on the road than at home this season, and it was swept at Comerica Park by the White Sox last weekend. Though Tigers hitters have taken a bit of a dip in the second half, their pitchers have taken a stunning one, to the tune of a 5.52 ERA, which was 1.21 higher than in the first half. RHPs Justin Verlander (5.04 ERA) and Jeremy Bonderman (8.10) and LHP Kenny Rogers (9.98) have struggled since the break. - Contributing: MLB.com

ONATHAN DANIEL / GETTY IMAGES

Things you need to know about ...

Ryan Braun

Considering it's August, you'd think you'd know all about the rookie third baseman who got to 15 homers faster than anybody in history save for Albert Pujols and who has slid comfortably into the No. 3 hole for a first-place team. But Ryan Braun plays in Milwaukee, so he hasn't gotten much pub yet. That will come if the Brewers stay in the race.

Even rookies who hit .348 with 19 homers and 52 RBIs in their first 63 big league games are not immune to hazing.

"I had to carry bags. I had to sing on the bus. I feel like I'm going to have to dress up soon." The singing performance came on his first full road trip after being called up. With the headphones to his iPod plugged into one ear, he sang "On Bended Knee" and "Water Runs Dry" by Boyz II Men. "I was into it, but I don't think my voice was too great."

He was a shortstop at the University of Miami, and this is his second full season at third base.

A shortstop has time to adjust his depth to play hops. A third baseman doesn't. "The hop kind of plays you. You get a lot more balls with topspin and a lot more in-between hops." Braun discussed the nuances of the position switch with Alex Rodriguez, who also moved from short to third and who works out at Miami in the offseason. One thing they talked about was how to best replicate those tricky hops when fungo hitters hit grounders to them in practice.

Braun is believed to be the highest-drafted Jewish player since Ron Blomberg was taken first overall in 1967.

He has connections with two other Jewish baseball icons: Sandy Koufax was born Sanford Braun but took his stepfather's name when his mom remarried, and Braun's grandfather has lived for 40 years in a home once owned by Hall of Famer Hank Greenberg. Another strange but true fact: Braun's mom also is a brewer—seriously, she makes beer for Anheuser-Busch.

His team's fatal flaw might be its struggles on the road; the Brewers are 39-19 at Miller Park, 21-32 away from home.

Don't blame Braun, who is hitting 40 points better on the road. That's one reason manager Ned Yost has no worries about batting a rookie third during the stretch run. "He's an extremely talented offensive player who has the utmost confidence," Yost says. "He just knows, man, that he can hit."

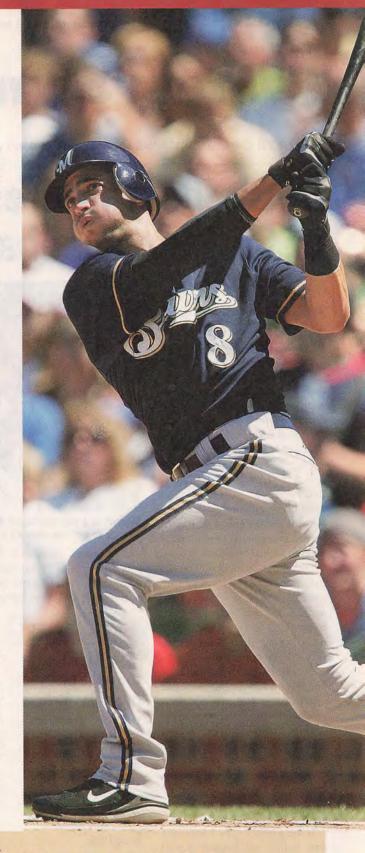
After growing up near Los Angeles and going to college at Miami, it has been an adjustment living in the Midwest.

And that might be a good thing. "The nightlife isn't as enticing as L.A. or Miami, or I might be tempted to go out more"

Don't read anything into the fact that Braun wasn't drafted out of high school.

He was a highly touted prospect, but he told teams he was out of their price range because he wanted to go to college. He chose Miami for its social scene, its academics, its athletics and because, "I think the girls were the deal closer on the recruiting trip."

-Matt Crossman



Kid contenders

Ryan Braun is one of a fistful of rookies playing a key role on a team in the playoff mix.

Yunel Escobar, IF, Braves. He has played at least 13 games at second base, shortstop and third base and has maintained a .327 average. Yovani Gallardo, RHP, Brewers. With Ben Sheets out, Gallardo has become the team's most consistent starter.

James Loney, 1B, Dodgers. He entered the week hitting .331 and is making Grady Little look smart for moving Nomar Garciaparra across the diamond.

Andrew Miller, LHP, Tigers. When he comes off the D.L. later this month, he will need to get his walks and pitch counts down. But he will be special someday.

Dustin Pedroia, 2B, Red Sox. After getting a cup of coffee last season, he has provided a jolt to the Sox as a regular in '07.

Reggie Willits, OF, Angels. His July numbers slipped, but this catalyst still has an on-base percentage near .400. —Kyle Veltrop

Fantasy Source

If you want to be commissioner, think outside the box ... and don't give in to whiners.

In the best interest of fantasy baseball

By Chris Bahr

cbahr@sportingnews.com

K, so I wasn't faced with the same kind of problems that David Stern, Roger Goodell and Bud Selig typically encounter. And it wasn't as if I stood to lose more than the temporary respect of a bunch of lifelong friends. But I still was not in an enviable position as baseball's trading deadline approached. Yes, I'm the commissioner.

A little background on this N.L.only league: We have a free-agent period every week from Sunday night to Monday night, immediately after I process

waiver claims on Sunday night. Other than during that window, all players not on an active roster are considered to be on waivers. This plan was imple-

mented because several owners complained they couldn't set aside time during their workday to follow the news and make pickups.

Because baseball's trading deadline fell on a Tuesday this year, I had a decision to make. A few deals probably would be announced during our free-agent period, and that meant some of my league's owners would miss out on the chance to get big-time players. Sensing the outrage that would trigger, I decided to bypass the freeagent period for that week.

It was a bold decision but one I now believe all leagues should follow-even leagues that allow daily transactions.

My proposal: All players are off-



Teixeira is a huge pickup in N.L.-only leagues-which is why the chance to get him couldn't be a first-come, first-served situation.

limits 24 hours before MLB's trading deadline, and they stay that way until 24 hours after the deadline. That gives every owner the chance to analyze the moves, carve out some free time to make pickups

and prioritize their wish lists. Then comes the mad dash.

It's not fair to make this a firstcome, first-served situation, especially in A.L.-only or N.L.-only leagues. In such setups, the acquisition of a big-time slugger or pitcher can change the landscape of the league. Take it from the guy who landed Carlos Beltran in this same N.L.-only league in 2004 and went on to win it all.

I can already hear the whining from the critics-I would have been one of the whiners as recently as last year-but I wonder what those same owners would say if they were the ones stuck in a meeting or a traffic jam the moment the Mark Teixeira trade news broke.

TOP(3)

Players whose value got a boost at the trading deadline

Jarrod Saltalamacchia, C/1B, Rangers. The opportunity for regular at-bats, either at catcher or first base, makes the switch-hitting Salty a must-start in all 5x5 formats. A.L.-only owners who made a quick move on him could benefit greatly.

Joakim Soria, RP, Royals. Anybody need a closer for the stretch run? Soria recorded 10 saves when Octavio Dotel was injured early in the season, and he has pitched well since returning from an injury of his own. With Dotel now in Atlanta, Soria warrants a spot on your 5x5 roster-if he's still available.

Nelson Cruz, OF, Rangers. With Kenny Lofton out of Texas' outfield mix, Cruz has his best (and possibly last) shot to be an everyday player. He'll man right field for the Rangers and look to show off his plus power. Points-leaguers need not apply-he'll rack up a lot of K's.

Danny Richar, 2B, White Sox. Richar, 24, is another A.L.-only type who will play every day. He had 13 home runs and 61 RBIs in 98 games at Class AAA this season; if he can produce like that in the majors, he'll improve on what his predecessor, Tadahito Iguchi, did.

Ty Wigginton, 3B, Astros. The former Devil Ray is an offensive upgrade over third baseman Morgan Ensberg, who was dealt to the Padres. Wigginton should make a smooth transition back to the N.L.; he was with the Pirates as recently as 2005. - Tom Gatto

BLOG ALERT

'Kyle Lohse moved from one horrible pitchers park to another. Despite brief glimpses of mediocrity, he's a No. 5 at best in N.L.-only leagues.'

Get Chris Bahr's fantasy spin on all the deadline deals at sportingnews.com.

AUGUST 13-19 The Angels are second in the majors in steals; the Blue Jays are third-worst at throwing out runners. Such SS Ryan Theriot

A.L. EAST

BALTIMORE ORIOLES LHP Jamie Walker converted his first four save chances after RHP Chris Ray went on the D.L. RHPs Danys Baez and Chad Bradford also will get chances to close games when the opponent has a lot of righthanders coming up. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: 1B/3B Aubrey Huff has been taking extra batting practice in an effort to find a stance that works for him. The coaches think he has been crouching too much, which limits his power to the opposite field. —Spencer Fordin

BOSTON RED SOX Adding RHP Eric Gagne to the bullpen will lessen the workload of LHP Hideki Okajima, who is playing a 162-game season for the first time in his career. Okajima entered the week with 49 appearances and a 1.01 ERA. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: Most starting pitchers spend much of their time in the clubhouse in the hours leading up to a start. Not RHP Daisuke Matsuzaka, who takes the field roughly four hours before the first pitch. He gets in a lot of running and does a bunch of mock deliveries, sometimes standing on the mound in front of a near-empty stadium. —Ian Browne

NEW YORK YANKEES The trade of RHP Scott Proctor creates roster flexibility in the bullpen. The team has been looking for a way to promote young pitching talent from Class AAA, including hard-throwing RHP Joba Chamberlain, SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: After struggling



COMING BACK STRONG:
Shutting down RHP Curt
Schilling, 40, for late June and
July should benefit the Red Sox.
Schilling used his time on the
D.L. to strengthen his shoulder,
and his fastball has its best life
in recent memory. Schilling
could dominate during the
stretch run.

in July, RHP **Brian Bruney** started using a full windup for the first time since high school, and he believes it has helped his command. —*Bryan Hoch*

TAMPA BAY DEVIL RAYS The team hoped RHP Brian Stokes would be the primary eighth-inning reliever, but problems with his mechanics have caused him to leave too many pitches up in the strike zone. He is thinking too much about his delivery instead of just pitching. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: RHP Jason Hammel has been throwing all four of his pitches for strikes since returning to the rotation. Hammel has found a good tempo with his delivery; he equates it to a golfer staying behind the ball on his backswing. He has been trying to play golf a lot to keep that rhythm. —Bill Chastain

TORONTO BLUE JAYS RHP Dustin McGowan got pounded in a mid-July start after he abandoned his curveball, which made him more predictable. Since then, McGowan has learned to stick with all four of his pitches, even when they're not as sharp as he would like. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: LF Reed Johnson, who missed three months because of a back injury, has been spending a lot of time focusing on his legwork with hitting coach Mickey Brantley. Johnson is working on having a smooth rotation in his torso as he brings his hands through the strike zone. —Jordan Bastian

A.L. CENTRAL

chicago white sox RHP Jose Contreras, who is 9-23 since the 2006 All-Star break, could have to work through his struggles in the bullpen if RHP Gavin Floyd continues to throw well in the rotation. Contreras has made it clear he'd rather pitch elsewhere than stay in the 'pen with the White Sox. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: RHP Bobby Jenks, the closer, has boosted his conditioning and weightlifting programs instead of scaling them back in an attempt to avoid the late-season fatigue that plagued him in 2006. He started the week with nine consecutive scoreless, hitless innings. —Scott Merkin

cleveland indians LHP Aaron Laffey made a strong debut after he was summoned to replace LHP cliff Lee when Lee was demoted to Class AAA. Laffey, who began the year at Class AA Akron, relies on control of his breaking ball to get ahead in the count early. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: The Indians' offense is among the league leaders in strikeouts and walks because of the team's philosophy of seeing as many pitches as possible. Their goal is to make the opposing starters labor and to get into the bullpen earlier. —Anthony Castrovince

DETROIT TIGERS Credit CF Curtis Granderson's extrabase hit parade in part to baserunning coach Andy Van Slyke, who has Granderson thinking aggressively out of the box instead of worrying about making mistakes on



of Luis Castillo opens up the Twins' second base job for switch-hitting rookie Alexi Casilla, who has leadoff hitter qualities and the speed Castillo once possessed. The hope is Casilla can provide a reliable glove and be a catalyst by getting on and stealing bases.

the basepaths. Granderson began the week tied with Alex Rodriguez for the A.L. lead with 62 extra-base hits. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: RHP Joel Zumaya doesn't expect to have to change the grip on his fastball when he returns from the D.L. If the torn tendon in his middle finger isn't flexible enough, though, he might have to switch to a more traditional curveball. — Jason Beck

returned to the closer role after the team traded RHP Octavio Dotel. Soria has several terrific pitches, including a curveball, and has shown poise in clutch situations. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: RHP Brian Bannister consistently varies his game plan to keep hitters off-balance. In one eight-inning outing, 90 percent of Bannister's pitches were fastballs. In another quality start, he used his changeup more than usual. —Conor Nicholl

MINNESOTA TWINS RHP Juan Rincon has fallen from setup man to mop-up man. He has struggled with his delivery, which leads to poor location and an ERA that's north of 6.00. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: RHP Scott Baker is pitching with more confidence and better command of his fastball. He's working the pitch in and out while keeping it down in the zone. The result has been fewer home runs allowed—just nine homers in 14 starts after 17 in 16 starts in 2006. —Kelly Thesier

Let's make a deal: deadline hoopla for management savvy

So you're disappointed your favorite team didn't trade for that one player you're convinced would have put it over the top?

Why didn't it? General managers are scared.

Let me explain. G.M.s have a secret club, more exclusive than any skull society. The trading deadline is when the baseball world tries to pull back the curtain of this secret society to see who has the best hand. G.M.s, however, are like everyone else-they don't like people meddling in their business. But as the deadline nears, that's what all of baseball is doing.

G.M.s occasionally can lie in the weeds and, when the time is right, up the asking price for what one club needs and boom: You've got the latest version of Larry Andersen for Jeff Bagwell or the kitchen sink for three months of Randy

In the cities where the fans think the team needs just one more player to reach October, they get whipped into a frenzy by radio goobs and columnists. When the club doesn't make a deal, its fans scream bloody murder. But there's so much more involved.

If a blockbuster leaks to the media before it's official, it can get shot down because it might mean one team has admitted it's now waiting until next year. It's tough to sell tickets when that happens.

Remember this, too: No one is trying to make a one-sided deal.

Scouts become worth their weight in gold at this time of year. Let's say one club-how about the Braves-wants Octavio Dotel. All the Braves scouts will see Dotel pitch and help decide if the Royals' asking price is too steep. While that fire is simmering, Kansas City G.M. Dayton Moore is working the phones with other clubs. It's a huge game of poker, usually decided by the scouts' evaluations of the involved players.

Dealing with a hard deadline is a deterrent to big trades. G.M.s like to take their time. If you're

The Braves had to pick the right time to ask for Dotel and offer the right price for him.

the Royals, you don't want to move Dotel too early because another club might decide at the last minute it's in the race and come up with a better offer. But if the Royals wait too long, the Braves could go elsewhere and leave the Royals with nothing.

In my experience, the trades that help most are small tweaks to the roster. If you're missing too big a piece, you're probably not really in it anyway. But G.M.s don't like to admit that.

E-mail Tigers reliever Todd Jones at tiones@sportingnews.com.

A.L.WEST

LOS ANGELES ANGELS C Jeff Mathis has taken advantage of Mike Napoli's trip to the D.L. and has solidified his role as a backup once Napoli (hamstring) returns. Mathis hasn't done much at the plate, but his defense has earned the trust of the pitching staff. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: 3B Chone Figgins credits maturity for his remarkable offensive spike this season, including a club-record 53 hits in June. His improved patience has led to better at-bats. -Lyle Spencer

OAKLAND ATHLETICS RHP Huston Street (elbow) was irritated he didn't regain his closer job right away after returning from the D.L. Manager Bob Geren said the success of interim closer Alan Embree gave the A's the luxury of working Street back in slowly. ... 3B Eric Chavez (back) finally went on the D.L. Marco Scutaro will get playing time at third base, and the team recalled IF J.J. Furmaniak, who was hitting for power and stealing bases at Class AAA. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: CF Mark Kotsay got out of a 1-for-22 slump with a subtle adjustment in his stance. Kotsay used to put much of his weight on his front leg. With his weight more evenly distributed, he is on a tear. -Mychael Urban



WORTH KEEPING: Relieved that he wasn't traded, 1B Casey Kotchman is determined to play a key role in the Angels' postseason drive. He struggled with his equilibrium after getting hit in the head with a pickoff throw in mid-June, but he's back to smacking line drives to the gaps.

SEATTLE MARINERS The most difficult decision new manager John McLaren has made so far is to sit 1B Richie Sexson indefinitely. Sexson, a streaky hitter, has been frigid most of the season and has become a target for disgruntled fans. It's time to see what Ben Broussard can do with regular atbats. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: By starting his hands lower and not having as much up-anddown movement, RHP Brandon Morrow has developed a smooth motion and has been throwing more strikes. The Mariners need him as closer J.J. Putz's primary setup man to keep their postseason hopes alive. -Jim Street

TEXAS RANGERS Jarrod Saltalamacchia will get the majority of his playing time at first base, but manager Ron Washington says Saltalamacchia will catch at least two times a week. He will also go to instructional league this winter to work on his catching technique. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: LHP C.J. Wilson has become more effective throwing his changeup, which has made him tougher against righthanded hitters. That gives him the ability to be more than a lefthanded specialist, and he's one of the options the Rangers are considering for the closer role. —T.R. Sullivan

Nationals 3B Ryan Zimmerman (.376 vs. lefties) began the week on track to face LH SPs Cole Hamels, Tom Glavine and Oliver Perez in succession.

N.L. EAST

ATLANTA BRAVES LHP Ron Mahay wasn't the team's most celebrated addition at the trading deadline, but his ability to get righthanders out makes him more than a specialist. Mahay has 13 appearances of more than one inning this season. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: Before stepping to the plate, IF Yunel Escobar jumps high in the air. Opponents don't always like that, but it's not just for show. Escobar provides a spark. During a late-July game in Arizona, he stole second base before an inattentive Jose Valverde had even toed the rubber. —Mark Bowman

FLORIDA MARLINS With RHP Josh Johnson (elbow) out for the season, RHP Rick VandenHurk will remain in the rotation, but the team will watch his innings closely. He had elbow surgery in 2005 and threw just 25 innings in the minors last season. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: RF Jeremy Hermida likes to study film on hitters such as Mets RF Shawn Green and Braves 3B Chipper Jones because they have similar approaches to his. Like Jones, Hermida uses a "tap step" timing mechanism. The tap step is when the batter picks up his front foot, then puts it back down before going into the full swing. It helps Hermida find his rhythm. —Joe Frisaro

NEW YORK METS With an eye toward RHP **Pedro Martinez**'s return, and because the team couldn't add

bullpen help at the trading deadline, RHP **Jorge Sosa** has



FLASH CRASH: RHP Tom Gordon's unreliability has become an issue for the Phillies. He is pitching with a slightly torn rotator cuff and can throw only once or twice a week. That's causing the team to use other relievers, particularly LHP J.C. Romero, more than desired.

been pitching in relief. He will be used in multiple roles and could still spot start if needed. Sosa allowed no runs and two hits in his first 5½ innings out of the bullpen.

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: While filling in for CF Carlos Beltran, Lastings Milledge has shown a more measured swing that is designed to take advantage of his quick hands and direct balls up the middle. —Marty Noble

PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES When 2B Chase Utley (hand) returns, Tadahito Iguchi figures to try third base. The team will have him field grounders there to gauge his reactions and arm. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: RF Shane Victorino's absence takes speed from the lineup and weakens the defense. Teams knew they couldn't run on Victorino's strong, accurate arm; now, they will be more daring trying for an extra base. —Ken Mandel

WASHINGTON NATIONALS Nick Johnson is expected to return to first base in 2008, which means Dmitri Young likely will be the left fielder. But for that to happen, he must lose about 20 pounds. SEE A. DIFFERENT GAME: SS Fellpe Lopez had a reputation as a poor fielder. But this season he is making acrobatic plays and fewer errors. Before games, manager Manny Acta hits about 30 to 40 grounders to Lopez, and most are difficult chances. Lopez, who is in his eighth season, hadn't received that kind of personal attention before. —Bill Ladson

N.L.CENTRAL

and Koyie Hill unless one of them takes off at the plate, though Hill will almost always handle animated RHP Carlos Zambrano. Kendall and Hill are no-nonsense, steady receivers. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: After a strong stretch, LHP Ted Lilly struggled recently against the Phillies because his mechanics got out of whack. Pitching coach Larry Rothschild says Lilly "runs at the plate" at times and that his arm has to catch up with his body. —Carrie Muskat

CINCINNATI REDS The team took a calculated risk by trading for Jorge Cantu, who had 117 RBIs for the Devil Rays in 2005 but has since dealt with injuries and poor production. He's in Class AAA. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: 2B Brandon Phillips found a way to exploit the Nationals' defensive shift against LF Adam Dunn. Phillips stole second without a throw, and with Nats 3B Ryan Zimmerman in the shortstop spot, he raced past Zimmerman to the open bag at third for two stolen bases on one play. —Mark Sheldon

HOUSTON ASTROS C Eric Munson has been splitting time with Brad Ausmus, but Munson likely won't claim the No. 1 job next year. He's an upgrade on offense, but his below-average arm will relegate him to part-time status. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: For a future starter, RHP Matt Albers has been impressive out of the bullpen. He's getting ahead in the count and throwing his changeup with



Wood will be used in middle relief as he is eased back into action. The Cubs are encouraged because the ball is coming out of his hand nice and easy and his slider has good rotation. His return was a reason the Cubs didn't add bullpen help at the trading deadline.

confidence, which helps against lefties. -Alyson Footer

MILWAUKEE BREWERS 2B Rickie Weeks was hitting just .212 when the team sent him to Class AAA Nashville. The soreness in his surgically repaired right wrist led to a tendency to pull off outside pitches. He'll be back for the stretch run. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: SS J.J. Hardy says he's thinking too much in the box, particularly about how high he holds his hands relative to his body. His homerless streak was at 122 at-bats entering the week. —Adam McCalvy

PITTSBURGH PIRATES The team's lack of patience cost it dearly in July. In its seven wins, the offense drew 2.9 walks per game; in the 17 losses, it averaged 1.7 walks.

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: Pitching coach Jim Colborn has worked with RHP Tony Armas not only on maintaining his balance and speeding up his release, but also on building Armas' confidence in his ability. It's working; Armas has a 0.98 ERA since July 1. —Jenifer Langosch

ST. LOUIS CARDINALS Despite his rocky debut, RHP Joel Pineiro will get several chances to find a home in the rotation. He was a reliever with the Red Sox but has been a starter most of his career. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: From his perch at first base, Albert Pujols could see that LHP Mike Maroth was tipping his off-speed pitches. That's just one thing, though, that Maroth needs to fix to stay in the team's long-term plans. —Matthew Leach

DREAMWEEK August 9-15

THURSDAY, AUGUST 9: Marlins at Phillies

A struggling Dontrelle Willis will hear fewer boos from the fans in Philly than he does in Miami. Then again, getting jeered hasn't been all that traumatizing for the D-Train, considering the Marlins usually draw crowds comparable to those at pro-Castro rallies in South Florida.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 10: Pirates at Giants

It's Matt Morris Appreciation Night in San Francisco. The first person in attendance who can explain why the small-budget Pirates added such an overpaid starting pitcher at the trading deadline gets to take batting practice against Morris—right before the Giants do.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 11: A's at Tigers

Mike Piazza recently had an Angels fan ejected for hitting him in the head with a half-filled water bottle. Incidentally, it was the first person Piazza had successfully thrown out in nearly eight years.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 12: Brewers at Astros

Hunter Pence's wrist injury will rob fans of seeing the N.L.'s top two rookies. But Brewers fans will continue to enjoy the Ryan Braun Show, though apparently not after late September.

MONDAY, AUGUST 13: Devil Rays at Red Sox

Including this series, the Red Sox still have 12 games remaining against the D-Rays. Meaning if Boston loses its division lead, it'll be the biggest choke since Mama Cass and her ham sandwich.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 14: Reds at Cubs

One team is shedding its C.U.B.S. (Completely Useless By September) acronym this season, but it's the same old story for the R.E.D.S. (Really Eliminated During Spring).

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 15: Royals at Rangers

During the teams' recent series in K.C., Emil Brown accidentally hit a reporter near the eye with a pellet from his toy gun. Reporters who cover the Rangers aren't all that scared, though. After all, they used to deal with Kenny Rogers. —Chris Bahr



155

THE ECSTASY ...

"It's Hank Aaron, I mean, Hank Aaron."

—Barry Bonds after tying Henry Aaron for baseball's all-time home run lead.

THE AGONY ...

"It's kind of sad because something like this you would hope would be a total celebration for the game of baseball. And obviously, it's not with a lot of people. And I can understand some of that."

> —Tigers manager Jim Leyland on the reaction to Bonds tying Aaron. Leyland was Bonds' first big league manager with the Pirates, for whom Bonds hit 176 homers.

N.L.WEST

ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS OF Chris Young doesn't have the on-base percentage of a prototypical leadoff hitter, but the organization likes that he takes a more focused approach when hitting in the No. 1 spot. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: SS Stephen Drew recently hustled out a ground ball with his team down 14-0. That's just one example of how Drew has earned the reputation for being a gamer. His teammates appreciate that he goes all out even though he has had a disappointing season at the plate. —Steve Gilbert

colorado rockies 2B Kazuo Matsui has fallen into the habit of pulling off pitches, which prevents him from driving the ball the opposite way and makes him susceptible to outside sinkers. See A DIFFERENT GAME: RHP Jorge Julio has corrected balance problems associated with his leg kick. And by moving from the first base to third base side of the rubber, he gets more of the strike zone with his slider and presents a tougher view for righthanders. Add in his above-average velocity, and he has become a nice setup reliever. —Thomas Harding

LOS ANGELES DODGERS The team added a dependable reliever in RHP Scott Proctor, acquired from the Yankees. The Dodgers needed Proctor, who came up through the team's system, because workhorse RHP Rudy Seanez hit the wall at the end of July, allowing six home runs in



RESPECTING HIS ELDERS:
Recently promoted Diamondbacks OF Justin Upton is just
19, but he has already gained
the respect of his teammates.
During his time in big league
camp the past two springs,
Upton carried himself in a
humble fashion. He was hitting
.309 at Class AA.

52/3 innings. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** 3B **Nomar Garciaparra** won't say what he's doing differently to account for his improvement at the plate. But one noticeable thing is Garciaparra is less inclined to pull off pitches, which allows his head to stay still. —*Ken Gurnick*

SAN DIEGO PADRES Of the team's new additions, Rob Mackowiak might have the biggest impact. He can play just about everywhere and gives the team a better pinch-hitting option than it had, especially with Geoff Blum playing more at second base. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: RHP Cla Meredith had struggled with the sink on his fastball since early May. He tinkered a lot with his arm angle before finally finding one that works. Meredith is again getting ground balls consistently. —Corey Brock

SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS 3B Pedro Feliz is in the last year of his contract, and some around the team have tired of his free-swinging ways. But his defensive skills are becoming more evident, and he even has shown more plate discipline of late. Finding an upgrade might be tougher than expected. SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: RHP Kevin Correla has thrived against lefthanded batters by frequently throwing his changeup, a pitch that tails low and away from them. He doesn't throw the change often to righthanded hitters because it travels into their swing path. —Chris Haft

FS

UNFAVORABLE SCHEDULES HITTERS Astros > Blue Jays > Indians > Rockies PITCHERS Devil Rays > Reds > Cardinals > Pirates

Drivers say they'll gamble, but I'm calling their bluff.

In the race for the Chase, all bets are off

By Kenny Bruce

ASCAR's Nextel Cup drivers talk a good game, but during the next several weeks it will be interesting to see whether they can put their gas pedals where their mouths are. I'm wagering they'll wind up leaving the gambling to shady characters who ply their trade on felt tables or darkened alleys and not on hard, unforgiving asphalt.

With a half dozen or so teams already a lock for the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup, we're told experimenting with pit strategies and taking otherwise perilous chances in order to wind up in victory lane will become the norm.

The reason? Under the new format for the Chase, the 12 drivers who qualify for the final 10-race showdown initially will be "seeded" according to how many wins each has earned going into the playoffs. Each driver will receive 5,000 points, then will be awarded 10 bonus points for each win scored in the first 26 races.



Don't expect Gordon or any of the other front-runners to overreach for a victory.

So a driver with, say, six wins would start the Chase with 5,060 points while a driver making the Chase without a win would start with 5,000.

Being virtually locked into the Chase could be seen as something of a safety net for those teams with a desire to play dangerously, but anyone who believes those teams will pull out all the stops in an attempt to win races and enhance their Chase status is sadly mistaken. The truth of the matter is each of these teams got to its current lofty points position by following a certain formula: Go for the win when you have a car capable of getting to victory lane, and when you don't, for heaven's sake, don't screw up.

It's a formula that's practically ingrained in them from the first time they climb behind the wheel. It's known as points racing, and though it may not be exciting, it's how champions are determined.

And now we're to believe that they can toss such a game plan aside as casually as a change

of clothes? If taking a gamble on the track could enhance a driver's chances at a championship, why wait until now? Why not throw caution to the wind at Daytona in February and keep pushing things until the haulers enter the garage some seven months later at Richmond?

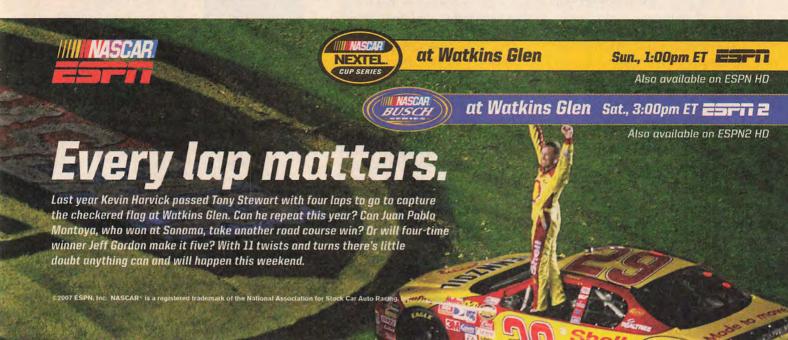
"From Day 1 when they announced the Chase format, that really hasn't changed the way we approach each race," says Richard Childress Racing driver Jeff Burton. "We come here to try to win the race, to do everything we can to win the race. If you

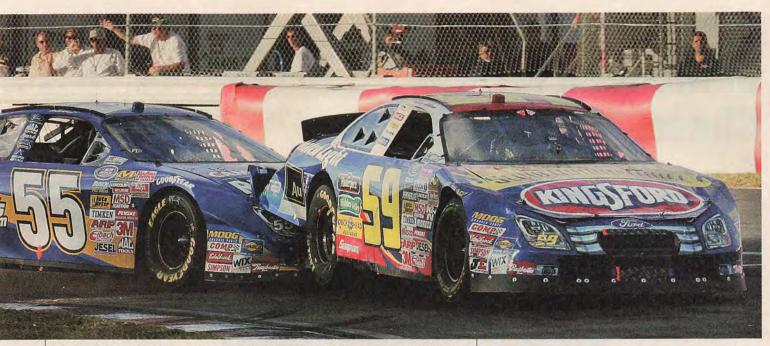
can't win the race, you want to finish second. If you can't finish second, you want to finish third."

To do otherwise would be akin to an NFL team with the league's leading rusher deciding to throw on every down. You don't change what works.

Taking more gambles? I wouldn't bet on it. SN

Kenny Bruce is an assistant managing editor for NASCAR Scene. Read more from Bruce at scenedaily.com.





Robby Gordon (55) checked Marcos Ambrose hard in the Busch race in Montreal.

Very Important Lesson No. 1: If you are going to do something stupid, do it early in the season. (VIL No. 2 coming up.) It was back at Dover, the 13th race of the season, when **Kurt Busch** lost



his cool and went after Tony Stewart on pit road. He brushed Stewart's car, but he also came close to hitting one of Stewart's crew members, who jumped out of harm's way. Busch was parked the rest of the race (he finished 42nd) and fined 100 points, which dropped him from 11th in the points standings to 17th. Busch has been on a tear since finishing third last month at Daytona, and with his big win last Sunday at Pocono, moved into 12th, the last spot eligible for the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup. Finally ... Very Important Lesson No. 2: Don't lose your cool. > When was the last time NASCAR fans were this eager for a Busch or Nextel Cup race at Watkins Glen? Last Saturday's shenanigans by Robby Gordon at Montreal have set the scene. Ask any spotter what one of his main priorities is during a race and he'll tell you that it is knowing where Gordon is at all times. That'll take on special meaning this weekend. > Martin Truex takes issue with those who

say he is one of the bubble drivers for the

Chase. "Everybody's on the Chase bubble. I mean, a couple of bad weeks ... look at **Jimmie Johnson**. I got home from Indy and looked at the points and couldn't believe that he was ninth."

True, but Johnson had a big enough cushion to absorb consecutive DNFs. Truex, 11th in points, doesn't have that luxury. He finished 28th at Watkins Glen in his first start there last year as a rookie and earlier this year finished 24th on the road course at Sonoma. > This is what Dale Earnhardt Jr. said before Pocono: "I'm a little frustrated. But I still feel like we'll make the Chase with ease because we're such a good team. If we don't make the Chase, I'll be the most surprised person in this garage because I feel totally confident that we've got control of it and we can get it done." Junior sure didn't sound confident or only a "little frustrated" during the first 120 or so laps of the race. His car handled so poorly early on that he dropped enough f-bombs in his radio communication back to his team to fill several catchcans. The adjustment his team made after his spin on Lap 122 might have saved his season. He lost ground to Busch, but not as much as he would have had he not finished second.

SPEED reads

Jimmie Johnson rebounded nicely at Pocono after two consecutive DNFs—a credit to him and his team. With only one race to go before crew chief Chad Knaus returns from suspension, this team is in fine position with five races left before the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup.



That **Mark Martin** has run five fewer races than full-time Nextel Cup competitors but still is within earshot of making the Chase says a lot about the season he is having and the driver he still is. Too bad he won't change his mind, run the next five races and try to fight his way in.

It's nice to see Dodge's resurgence the past two weeks, but it's hard to say the Dodge boys are totally back until they stop getting their butts kicked on intermediate tracks. Kurt Busch should make the Chase, but he isn't a threat to win it because the Chase is loaded with intermediate tracks.

Rumors that have Kyle Busch ending up at DEI make the most sense. He'd have a chance at being that organization's 1A driver, equal to Martin Truex, rather than No. 3 at Joe Gibbs Racing.

The dark horse to win the Chase? Carl Edwards. He's at his best on intermediate tracks, and he's also in the top five in percentage of laps run on the lead lap—a huge factor in Chase performance. —Roger Kuznia

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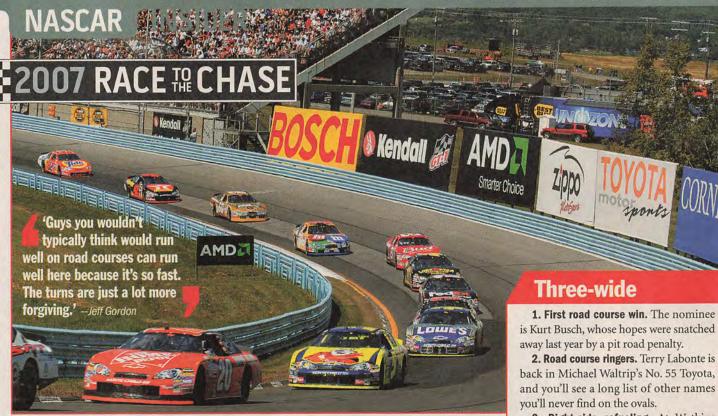


HIS CAMRY PROVIDED THE HORSEPOWER. LEFFLER PROVIDED THE WILLPOWER.

Taking the lead with two laps to go, a determined Jason Leffler captured Toyota's first-ever NASCAR Busch Series win at O'Reilly Raceway Park. The victory moved Leffler and his Great Clips Camry into third place in the overall driver standings. Congratulations to Jason and everyone at Braun Racing on this historic achievement. For the latest news, visit toyota.com/pitpass







Racing rewind Last year's 22nd race

No driver dropped out of the top 10 after the AMD at The Glen. Tony Stewart, seventh in the standings after the race, gave himself more cushion with a second-place finish. Dale Earnhardt Jr. finished 18th and Kasey Kahne 22nd, giving Junior (10th in points) a 54-point lead over Kahne (11th).

Kevin Harvick picked up his first Nextel Cup road race win after a fierce late-race duel with Stewart.

The story of the day was Kurt Busch's bad luck. He was headed to the pits when the caution came out. The timing was awful. He was only a few feet from the commitment line and didn't have time to pull back onto the track. A resulting penalty forced him to the back of the pack, and he finished 19th. That penalty cost Busch, 12th in points, a win or a top five finish and at least 60 points, ending any hopes he had of challenging Earnhardt for the 10th spot.

The top 10 in points after race No. 22: Jimmie Johnson, Matt Kenseth, Harvick, Jeff Burton, Kyle Busch, Mark Martin, Stewart, Denny Hamlin, Jeff Gordon, Earnhardt.

- is Kurt Busch, whose hopes were snatched
- 2. Road course ringers. Terry Labonte is back in Michael Waltrip's No. 55 Toyota, and you'll see a long list of other names
- 3. Right-side refueling. At Watkins Glen, the cars seldom turn left, and the fuel receptacle is on the right side. Finding the proper balance on these mirror-image cars is crucial.

Centurion Boats at The Glen

When: 2 p.m. ET Sunday TV: ESPN, 1 p.m. ET

Where: Watkins Glen (N.Y.) International

Track: 2.45-mile road course Race length: 90 laps/220.5 miles 2006 winner: Kevin Harvick 2006 polesitter: Kurt Busch Website: theglen.com

| Points leaders at Watkins Gle | | Aces Ave. | trish | ins w | 10 45 | 19 105 Laps Led | Driv | et rating | an points | 0 |
|----------------------------------|----|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-----------------|-------|-----------|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Jeff Gordon | 14 | 12.6 | 4 | 6 | 7 | 1,235/176 | 96.5 | 3,236 | | |
| 2. Denny Hamlin | 1 | 10.0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 90/0 | 100.3 | 2,870 | | |
| 3. Matt Kenseth | 7 | 17.4 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 631/1 | 67.4 | 2,825 | | 1 |
| 4. Jeff Burton | 13 | 19.8 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 1,048/54 | 75.5 | 2,763 | | (|
| 5. Tony Stewart | 8 | 6.8 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 722/170 | 140.1 | 2,749 | | 1 |
| 6. Carl Edwards | 2 | 12.0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 182/0 | 77.1 | 2,682 | Sul Sul | i |
| 7. Jimmie Johnson | 5 | 16.4 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 385/4 | 101.2 | 2,624 | | 1 |
| 8. Kyle Busch | 2 | 21.0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 182/0 | 78.7 | 2,611 | 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 | , |
| 9. Kevin Harvick | 6 | 8.0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 542/29 | 106.5 | 2,600 | | 2 |
| 10. Clint Bowyer | 1 | 14.0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 90/0 | 79.7 | 2,552 | SOVARDS PUMP | 1 |
| 11. Martin Truex | 1 | 28.0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 90/0 | 58.7 | 2,434 | (April 1043) | t |
| 12. Kurt Busch | 6 | 25.0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 491/39 | 96.4 | 2,399 | Buc Buc | 2 |
| 13. Dale Earnhardt Jr. | 7 | 17.6 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 596/13 | 75.1 | 2,392 | | 1 |
| 14. Ryan Newman | 5 | 15.0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 451/19 | 82.7 | 2,309 | S Condin | t |
| 15. Greg Biffle | 4 | 35.2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 320/23 | 49.7 | 2,186 | | 5 |

On the hot seat

Dale Earnhardt Jr.

Yeah, he was here last week, too. So the guy goes out and runs second at Pocono-and loses a spot in the standings. Now Junior is 13th, on the outside looking in, because Kurt Busch, one spot behind him last week, won at Pocono. Go figure. At least Junior got some positive momentum going. And so did Busch.

In his rookie Cup season, JUAN PABLO MONTOYA is a dark-horse candidate to make the Chase. Next year, he could be a front-runner.

In the aftermath of his runner-up finish at the Allstate 400 at the Brickyard last month, someone asked Juan Pablo Montoya whether he could still make the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup.

It's a stretch to think that's possible, but six months ago the notion would have been absurd.

After finishing 16th Sunday at Pocono, Montoya is 18th in the standings, 267 points behind 12th-place Kurt Busch. He'd likely need top 10 finishes in the next five races before the Chase cutoff to have any shot—and he would still need help from the drivers ahead of him.

But this week's stop is at a road course, Watkins Glen, and we all know what Montoya can do on a road course. Michigan, next week's track, and California on September 2 are relatively simple 2-mile ovals on which Montoya could be successful.

OK, stop. Again, the very idea that Montoya is even a dark-horse contender to make the 2007 Chase is kind of out there.

But ask yourself this question: If he shows as much improvement from now to the end of his rookie Nextel Cup season as he has so far, wouldn't you just about have to consider him a candidate to make the 2008 Chase?

"I think from where I thought I was going to be at this point, you'd have to say I am way ahead," Montoya says. "But from where I want to be, we are still behind."

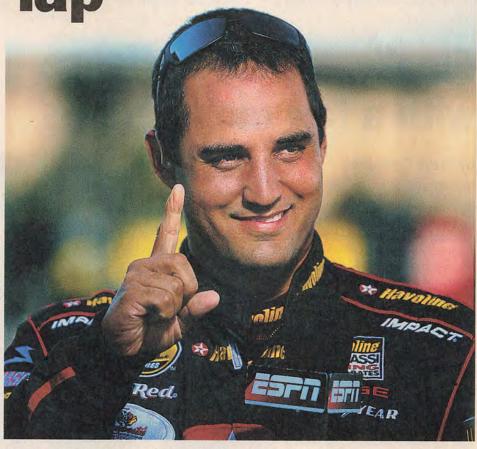
This is Montoya's mentality. He's not a novelty act or a road course ringer.

He has won the Indianapolis 500 and the Grand Prix of Monaco. He's one of three drivers with victories in NASCAR, Formula One and American open-wheel racing.

If he keeps getting better, he's going to make a lot of motorsports history. But what he's more interested in is making NASCAR history.

"We have to be able to do what Hendrick Motorsports does," he says of his Chip Ganassi Racing with Felix Sabates team. "They show up every week and they're up there. You have to be good week in and week out."

In 21 Cup races this season, Montoya has a win on the road course at Sonoma in June and a



fifth-place finish in March at Atlanta to go with his second at Indianapolis. His only other top 10 finish is an eighth at Texas in April.

"I am in a nice position," says Montoya, who will turn 32 next month. "I have managed to achieve a lot of things in my life already, and now I don't have the pressure of performing to keep my job. It's great working for Chip since he believes 100 percent in me."

Montoya has been No. 1 once this year—on a road course. But he's no one-trick pony.

It might be a little early for stock car fans to believe so strongly that Montoya will ultimately be the kind of consistent contender he expects himself to be.

But it sure is getting a lot harder to doubt it.

—David Poole

Pit box



Fantasy experts Roger Kuznia and Vinnie Iyer pick Nextel Cup race winners.

Who will win at Watkins Glen?

2 p.m. ET Sunday, ESPN

Roger: I watched at Sonoma in June when Richard Childress Racing, led by Kevin Harvick, finished 2-3-4 in the first road course race of the season. Harvick has six top 10 finishes in 13 road course races and once again is a threat to finish in the top five every week. You also might remember he's the defending champion of this race.

Vinnie: It's good you're looking to the past with Harvick, Roger, but history tells me a different story—that Tony Stewart is the best bet to win. He's 3-for-8 at this track, and Smoke is again hot heading into August. Harvick, meanwhile, has cooled off since he won at The Glen last season and will be the one finishing second behind his good friend. Here, kitty kitty.

- Sleeper: Boris Said.
- Not so fast: Jimmie Johnson.
- Sleeper: Robby Gordon (if he races).
- Not so fast: Matt Kenseth.

Nextel Cup points (based on how the experts' choices finished in points races): Roger, 2,881; Vinnie 2,726.

Devin Hester and Greg Olsen will give Chicago the winged feet it needs to fly.

Finally, a Bears offense with a few monsters

By Steve Greenberg

sgreenberg@sportingnews.com

t's not free agency. It's not injuries. It's not a lethal schedule. No, the biggest team killer in the NFL is a Super Bowl loss. Five of the past six runners-up have missed the playoffs the following season. The past nine have combined for one measly playoff win on the rebound.

The Bears, it would seem, are in a heap of trouble.

Don't you believe it.

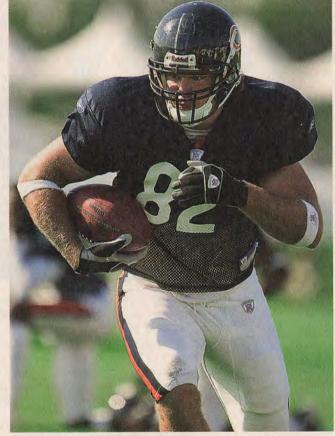
With a healthy Tommie Harris and Mike Brown and the addition of veteran tackle Darwin Walker, the Chicago defense will be even better this season—as good as it has been since the days of Singletary, Hampton and Dent.

But send that to the back of your head for now, if you don't mind. And wrap your brain around this concept: The Bears—barring a complete collapse by quarterback Rex Grossman—will have the most improved offense in the league.

Until I am proved wrong, I will be dangling, perhaps pathetically, from a fishing pole in Burnham Harbor, where Soldier Field's reflection illumi-

nates the water. But there are three reasons you should join me—hook, line and sinker—in anticipation of an offensive renaissance in Chicago:

■ The deep middle is there for the taking. Imagine a single-back formation with Bernard



Olsen, the Bears' first-round pick, says he's joining 'an exciting offense.' Well, it is now that you're there, big fella.

Berrian and Mark Bradley split wide, Devin Hester in the slot and rookie Greg Olsen at tight end. That's four extreme speed guys. In the NFC North—a cover 2 division where the deep middle always seems to be a soft spot—the Bears will strike faster than any offense has since Randy Moss' prime.

Over a weekend at Bears training camp, I

watched those four receivers work together and dominate the first-team defense. Brian Urlacher couldn't run with Olsen. No one on the defense could run with Hester, the best return man in football and an even bigger rock star now that he has been converted to offense from cornerback.

"Maybe Steve Smith," says offensive coordinator Ron Turner when asked for a Hester comparison. "That would be the only other

guy."

The old guys. Oops, I forgot to mention wide receiver Muhsin Muhammad and tight end Desmond Clark, the former still a starter and a star and the latter a ninth-year procoming off his best season.

Muhammad, 34, will face single coverage more than he has since his 93-catch, 16-touchdown season with the Panthers in 2004. And Clark, who blocks well, runs good routes, has terrific hands and doesn't mind sharing the job, is the perfect mentor for Olsen.

"He's even better than I imagined—much better," Clark says of the team's first Round 1 tight end since Mike Ditka. In two-tight end sets, Clark will be an easy target for Grossman as defenses key on Olsen.

Olsen will line up at fullback on many pass routes, and he'll spend a lot of time in the slot, a la Antonio Gates and Jeremy Shockey. The Bears will be totally unpredictable. "Every day we do new things and have guys lining up in different spots," Olsen says, "so it's definitely an exciting offense."

They'll run the ball a little, too. Olsen's arrival just might make Cedric Benson's career. Ask LaDainian Tomlinson how much it helps his cause to

have Gates lined up in the slot occupying one of the defense's best players. Ask Priest Holmes what Tony Gonzalez meant to his career.

"If he's able to stay healthy," Clark says, "he's going to get the carries that he needs to produce 1,800 yards this year."

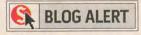
Gee, is that all?

It won't take nearly that many for the Bears offense to be Super Bowl-worthy this time around.

speedreads

The two best weakside linebackers in the NFC reside in the North, but neither of them is the Bears' Lance Briggs. Expect Green Bay's A.J. Hawk and Detroit's Ernie Sims to build on promising rookie years with stellar second seasons.

As the Colts' feature back, Joseph Addai will get enough rushing and receiving touches to eclipse 2,000 yards from scrimmage this season. —Vinnie lyer



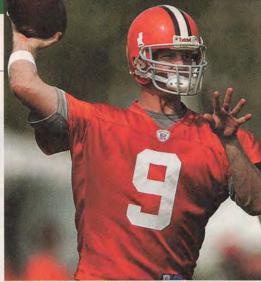
'Maybe I've been standing in the hot suburban Detroit sun too long, but if Calvin Johnson learns Mike Martz's scheme, the Lions' offense could be dominant.'

Give Matt Crossman some heat at sportingnews.com.

INSIDE DISH

While first-round pick **Brady Quinn** continues to hold out, the internal debate about who should begin the season as the Browns' starting quarterback is lively. Incumbent **Charlie Frye** has some strong allies, including Hall of Fame RB **Jim Brown**, a team consultant with a strong voice. General manager **Phil Savage** spent a third-round pick

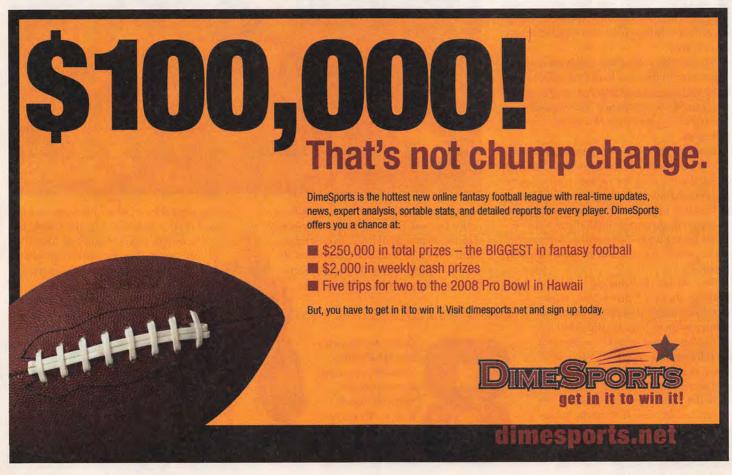
on Frye but likes **Derek Anderson** from the days when he and Anderson were in the Ravens organization. Savage admires Anderson's strong arm and quick release. Coach **Romeo Crennel** likes Frye's toughness and mobility and won't be quick to conclude Frye's 18 starts in the past two seasons were a waste of time. Complicating the debate is the need to calculate when Quinn should start playing. The official word out of Seahawks camp is that **Nate Burleson** will vie with **D.J. Hackett** for the Seahawks' starting split end spot. Unofficially, most expect Hackett to win the job. Burleson, a big-money free-agent pickup last offseason, has



Frye likely isn't the Browns' quarterback of the future, but he'd like to hold on to the present.

been slow to grasp the nuances of Seattle's passing game. Hackett has made plays in whatever role he has filled the past two seasons. Though he must improve his practice and preparation habits, Hackett catches the ball when it's thrown to him, regardless of the situation. > Don't rule out the possibility that Lions president Matt Millen will keep his job even if he presides over a seventh straight season with double-digit losses. Owner William Clay Ford says he never considered firing Millen last year and has indicated he's confident that Millen, who has guided the Lions to a 24-72 record in the past six years, and coach Rod Marinelli are the right men to turn things around. Ford, who has given playoff ultimatums in the past, refuses to give a wins total that will allow Millen to keep his

job, saying only that he wants to see the team continue to improve. > First-round DT Justin Harrell is off to a slow start with the Packers. He reported to camp about 15 pounds overweight and has had trouble getting used to playing with pads. Harrell played in only three games for Tennessee last season before suffering a season-ending biceps injury, so it has been a long time since he has been in football shape. He's sluggish off the ball during his pass-rush turns and is unable to beat offensive linemen with his first step. He's running with the second team despite being listed No. 1 on the depth chart. —SN correspondents



Fantasy Source

Practice might not make perfect, but it will give you valuable insight to use against opponents on D-Day.

Don't knock the mock draft experience

By Roger Kuznia

rkuznia@sportingnews.com

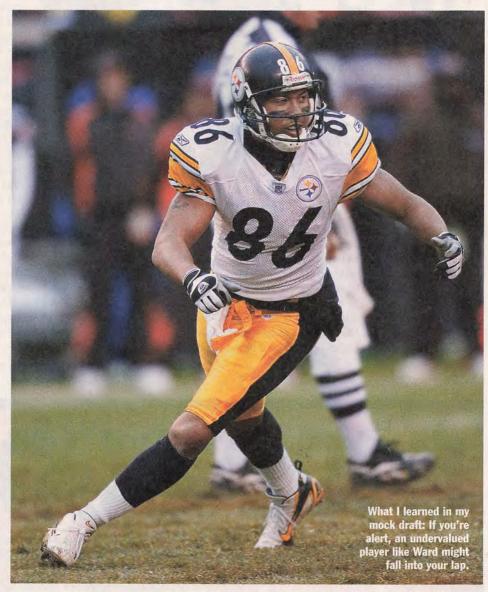
t's fun-and absolutely instructive-to take part in fantasy football mock drafts. You gain major insight into how owners view and value players, and you always end up gathering information to use against others on draft day.

Sporting News offers free online mock drafts where our members can hone their skills. Just go to fantasygames.sportingnews.com/football to get in on the experience. You could end up drafting against me or any of my Fantasy Source colleagues.

In one recent mock draft, I found three wide receivers-Plaxico Burress, Santana Moss and Hines Ward—who, for various reasons, were highly undervalued. Reading some of the banter in the site's built-in chat room, you begin to understand why people think the way they do about these players. You need to look past the public perceptions and focus on players' on-field

One owner said during a draft, "I hate drafting Burress." But a look at the numbers reveals there is no reason to think poorly of him. He did fall short of 1,000 receiving yards last season, but he still caught a career-high 10 touchdown passes despite Eli Manning's upand-down performance. Don't buy into the negativity surrounding the Giants and Burress: If Manning is even remotely better in 2007, Burress will benefit.

Moss, who is coming off one of the



worst seasons of his career, wasn't in the best situation last year, either. He battled injuries early, then the ineptitude of Redskins quarterback Mark Brunell. When Jason Campbell took over for Brunell late in the season, Moss became a big part of a reinvigorated

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

Consecutive seasons Colts WR Marvin Harrison has reached double digits in touchdown receptions, an NFL record. Harrison, who will turn 35 this month, hauled in 12 last season.

passing game. He racked up 326 receiving yards and three touchdowns in the team's five December games. Campbell found his No. 1 man often, and that bodes well for 2007. Get this: Moss fell to the seventh round in that draft.

> Ward also is coming off injury troubles, but remember: He has double-digit touchdown receptions in three of his past five seasons. If the Steelers give quarterback Ben Roethlisberger more chances to throw this year, Ward has a good shot at making it four of six. And I got him as my No. 3 starter. Now that's value.

Think early or suffer late

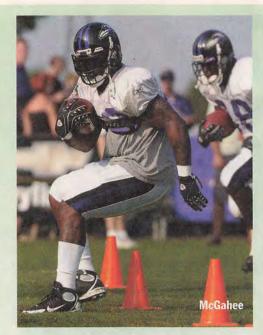
How important is the early-season schedule to your draft strategy? Not as important as the matchups in Weeks 14-16 (fantasy playoff time), but you probably won't get to the playoffs if your team starts 0-4.

Some schedule cakewalks and potential pitfalls of note in the season's first quarter:

Most favorable

Willis McGahee, Ravens. (at Bengals, Jets, Cardinals, at Browns) Need a reason to like the Baltimore newcomer? He'll be facing three run defenses that ranked in the league's lower half last season and a fourth (the Bengals') that barely avoided such indignity.

Willie Parker, Steelers. (at Browns, Bills, 49ers, at Cardinals) The Steelers' first four opponents this season allowed a combined average of 130.7 rushing yards last season.



Most unfavorable

Marshawn Lynch, Bills. (Broncos, at Steelers, at Patriots, Jets) Lynch probably will be a cheap trade target after an opening stretch that includes two perennial run-stuffing units (Steelers, Patriots) and two defenses on the rise (Broncos, Jets).

Thomas Jones, Jets. (Patriots, at Ravens, Dolphins, at Bills) If you own Jones and can survive this stretch, you'll be OK. His first three opponents were ranked in the top eight against the run in 2006, but the Bills (28th) begin a six-week stretch of mostly favorable matchups for Jones. -George Winkler



BLOG ALERT

'Somebody will end up with Adrian Peterson as his No. 2 fantasy back, and that somebody isn't going to be me. That decision has everything to do with the talent surrounding him in Minnesota.'

George Winkler wants to know if you're that somebody. Toot the Vikes' horn at sportingnews.com.

RANKINGS Wide receivers

Steve Smith Panthers

Chad Johnson Bengals **Terrell Owens**

Cowboys **Marvin Harrison** Colts

Torry Holt Rams

Reggie Wayne Colts

Larry Fitzgerald Cardinals

Javon Walker Broncos

Donald Driver Packers

Roy Williams Lions

Margues Colston Saints

Randy Moss Patriots

T.J. Houshmandzadeh Bengals

Anquan Boldin Cardinals

Lee Evans Bills

Andre Johnson Texans

Darrell Jackson 49ers

Plaxico Burress

Giants **Chris Chambers**

Dolphins **Calvin Johnson**

Lions **Braylon Edwards**

Browns Hines Ward

Steelers

Mark Clayton Ravens Reggie Brown

Eagles Santana Moss

Redskins



In this case, two is better than one

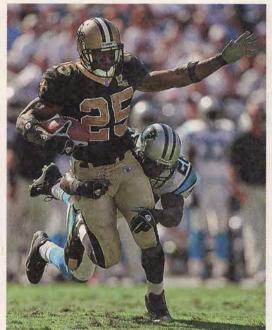
We asked our 32 correspondents which team has the best running back duo in the NFL, and the Chargers won easily. The trouble with our poll was that argument plays out a little differently on the field than at the ballot box.

There's no doubt Michael Turner-the Chargers' insurance policy for league MVP LaDainian Tomlinson—is the best pure backup running back in the league. But the complementary talents of Deuce McAllister and Reggie Bush have become the lifeblood of the Saints' high-powered offense.

San Diego can roll up yardage and points with Turner on the bench. New Orleans, however, needs to feature both McAllister and Bush in different formations and situations to get the most out of its running and passing games.

Just when defenses think they can handle the straight-ahead power of McAllister, the Saints trot out Bush's speed and quickness. Because McAllister and Bush are so good at executing their specific styles, it's extremely hard to prepare for the Saints' running game.

The Saints take full advantage of their backfield versatility, whether it's by lining up McAl-



Because the Saints know how to take advantage of Bush's skills, he's half of the best combo in the NFL.

lister alone or using Bush like a wide receiver. For defenses, just knowing which back is in the game isn't the key-the Saints can run or pass regardless of whether McAllister or Bush is on the field. Their typical formula for success includes some big plays from Bush or a wide receiver early and then going to a consistent INSIDERS POLL

Who has the best RB duo in the NFL?

saints: Deuce McAllister and Reggi

Fred Taylor and Maurice Jones-Drew

Cowboys: Marion Barber and Julius Jones

Redskins: Clinton Portis and Ladell Betts

Based on a poll of SN's 32 team correspondents

dose of McAllister to pound away for victories in the second half.

If either of them goes down, New Orleans' offensive machine is bound to sputter—the special symbiosis of McAllister and Bush gives the Saints the NFL's best backfield duo.

-Vinnie Iver

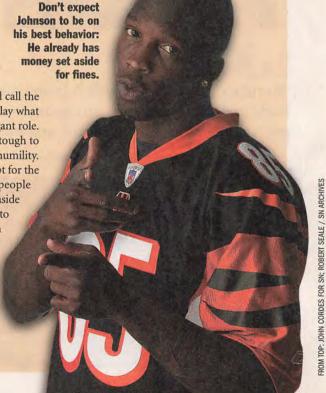
Dear diary: It's me, Ocho

Chad Johnson is flamboyant. He's confident. And he's certainly talented; he's the first NFL player to lead a conference in receiving yards for four consecutive seasons. But a peek inside his mind reveals he's not satisfied with his game.

I'm going back to the old '05 Chad-the talking, the celebrating, the getting fined-all that. It's going to be a very entertaining got-toget-to-the-playoffs season. I want to carry the load. It was brought to my attention my whole game needs work, regardless of the numbers I put up. I was put back in a humble moment, feeling like I hadn't accomplished much, which is a good thing. The coaches basically said, 'What can we do to continue to push someone who's already self-motivated?' They pushed all the right buttons. It put two unbelievably big chips on my shoulders and an enormous monkey on my back. Therefore, you've created a bigger beast and a bigger animal than what you already had. This is going to be a ridiculously monster season. Last year, I tried to change. I tried to be quiet. I tried not talking,

playing what the outside world would call the humble role. This year, I'm going to play what the outside world would call the arrogant role. I call it confidence. Me being me, it's tough to walk the line between arrogance and humility. But I do back it up with my play, except for the last few weeks of last season. Some people aren't going to like it, but I set money aside for fines. I did it in 2005. This is a year to entertain everyone. Week 1, if I touch the end zone, you will laugh for a lifetime. Marvin might sit me down for the next game. But you will laugh. - With Chick Ludwig

To read a player diary from your favorite team, go to: sportingnews.com/nfl/warroom.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BOB LEVERONE / SN; MATTHEW KUTZ / SN; ROBERT SEALE / SN ARCHIVES

FOCUS ON PROBLEM SPOTS



On the first day of camp, Giants DE Osi Umenylora twice got past LT David Diehl for would-be sacks. This was not unexpected; Diehl is in his first year as a full-time left tackle. He needs plenty of work against smaller, quicker speed rushers, which is why his battles with Umenyiora figure to be valuable-and onesided, for now. ... The Ravens haven't found an answer at fullback and probably won't until the start of the regular season. Rookie Le'Ron McClain has been getting a lot of reps but is raw-especially catching passes out of the backfield, which is a major staple in the Ravens' offense. Justin Green (knee) has experience in the offense but has missed all of training camp so far. ... Injuries have weakened the Broncos at receiver behind Javon Walker. Rod Smith (hip) opened camp on the physically unable to perform list, and his absence could run into the season. Brandon Marshall (quadriceps) also has missed practice time, which is trying coach Mike Shanahan's patience. The one bright spot has been the showing of Brandon Stokley, although a thigh problem kept him out of a couple workouts. ... In a competitive battle for the Jaguars' wide receiver spots, Mike Walker is the only one who has performed well consistently. The others have made highlight-reel catches, but those grabs too often are offset by dropped and bobbled balls on routine passes. ... With LT Chris Samuels (knee) out for four weeks, the Redskins' offensive line is not nearly as settled as the coaching staff would like. Todd Wade is not a definite starter at left guard, and RG Randy Thomas is coming back from arthroscopic knee surgery and has yet to take on a full workload in practice. ... The Titans would like to play DE Kyle Vanden Bosch on fewer downs to keep him fresher, but depth behind him is a concern. Travis LaBoy and Antwan Odom have been injured and inconsistent in their first three NFL seasons. ... The Cardinals are desperate to find a tight end who can thrive as a blocker. Leonard Pope, Troy Bienemann and rookie Ben Patrick can catch the ball, but none has been able to hold the point of attack. Tim Euhus is probably the best blocker of the six tight ends in camp and could stick with the team for that reason. ... The Cowboys aren't any closer to finding a fullback than they were at the start of training camp. Oliver Hoyte, a converted linebacker, is still

Surprise, surprise: A young QB is having growing pains

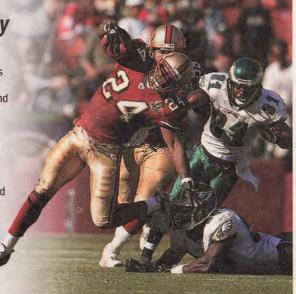
Vikings QB **Tarvaris Jackson**'s first week of training camp went about as expected. He displayed a strong arm and seems to have good pocket presence. But Jackson fumbled a large number of snaps, a sign he is distracted at the line of scrimmage. His accuracy also was slow to come around; Jackson rushed some short and midrange throws.



learning the position. Lousaka Polite is a cerebral player but isn't the physical blocker the Cowboys prefer. Rookie Deon Anderson is a good blocker but is still thinking too much to be consistent. The winner of this job won't be determined until the end of the preseason. ... The Buccaneers are struggling at offensive tackle. LT Luke Petitgout is new to the system, and second-year pro Jeremy Trueblood is still learning how to play right tackle. The good news is that the Bucs can plug Anthony Davis into either spot. But that could weaken them at left guard, where they would have to lean on rookie Arron Sears. ... The Texans like C.C. Brown as the starter at free safety, but they want to get more playmaking ability from the position. Brown is being pushed by Von Hutchins and Dexter McCleon. In addition, Brandon Harrison, after missing offseason workouts, arrived at camp far ahead of where the coaches expected him to be, but he is unproven.

Now the 49ers really need a No. 2 back

Developing a viable backup for 49ers RB Frank Gore took on greater urgency when Gore broke a bone in his right hand during a practice drill. Team doctors estimate it will take about a month for the break to heal, and the 49ers are considering holding Gore out of all four exhibition games. Michael Robinson, Maurice Hicks and rookie Thomas Clayton are vying for the No. 2 spot, and Robinson appears to have the slight edge.



playing time to be split more evenly. ... RAIDERS S B.J. Ward has been a pleasant surprise. Ward didn't play in the NFL last year and wasn't expected to do much this season. But he has

shown a knack for big plays and has grasped coordinator **Rob Ryan**'s scheme, which is similar to the

Tucker out ...
no problem

Losing **Ryan Tucker** to a four-game suspension hurts the Browns' offensive line depth, but it shouldn't fracture the starting lineup. In fact, it actually solves a problem.

Tucker, who was suspended under the NFL's banned substance policy, projected as a potential starting right tackle in his return from a 2006 season in which he suffered from a mental disorder. Now, though, incumbent left tackle **Kevin Shaffer** can move to the right side and compete with **Kelly Butler**.

That opens the door for rookie Joe Thomas—the No. 3 overall pick in the draft—to step in at left tackle. Thomas, who recently signed his contract, is having a good camp and provides a significant upgrade in athleticism on the left side.

Had Tucker won the right tackle job, Shaffer, who signed a big free-agent contract before last season, might have been the odd man out.

one Ward played in under Ryan's twin brother, Rex, with the Ravens. ... JAGUARS C Brad Meester cracked a bone in his ankle and could be out 10 weeks. The team will miss Meester, but the coaches are confident Dennis Norman can handle the job. The biggest concern will be maintaining continuity without Meester making the line calls. ... The BILLS want to get WR Roscoe Parrish and his big-play ability more involved in the offense. He has the speed to become a vertical threat, but also look for him to get the ball on short passes so he can use his quickness in the open field. ... Chukky Okobi has spent the early part of training camp as the starting center, but new STEELERS coach Mike Tomlin also will look at Sean Mahan, a free-agent pickup who was brought in to be the eventual replacement for retired C Jeff Hartings. Though Okobi has been running with the first team, Mahan could be the

starter by the regular season. ... **JETS** DE **David Bowens**, a free-agent pickup, adds a needed dimension as a nickel pass rusher. On a team that features mostly power rushers, Bowens provides speed off the edge. He has a quick first step and a relentless motor. ... The **TITANS** believe **Michael Roos** will be more effective now that he has some experience at left tackle. He shifted to

the left side after playing right tackle as a rookie. Roos has good feet and athleticism. He also has a good temperament; he doesn't get rattled. ... **RAVENS** rookie OT **Jared Gaither**, a fifth-round supplemental draft pick, has the potential to be



The Bills are looking for ways to make more frequent use of Parrish's big-play ability.

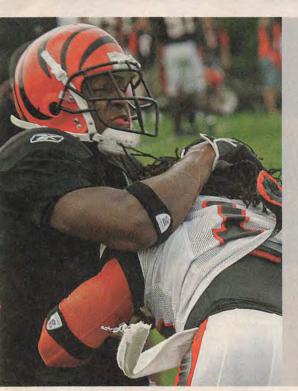
A 'clumsy' Law is good news

Ty Law is off to a great start in training camp, which is welcome news for a Chiefs team that is precariously thin at cornerback. Law says he is healthier than at any time since he injured his foot three years ago and that it is allowing him to make plays he couldn't the past two seasons.

"I'm able to do some things that I haven't been able to do in a while," says Law, a 12-year veteran who adds that improved health also has created new problems. "I actually feel kind of clumsy because I'm able to make breaks and cuts that I haven't done. I'm tripping over my own feet at times because I'm quicker.

"It's just a matter of catching back up to where I'm used to. The last three years since I broke my foot have been tough, and it's been more of a mental game. I'm finally starting to catch up with the physical part of it, so I think it should help me overall."





And at this corner ...

First-round CB **Leon Hall** is everything the Bengals expected.

The minute Hall signed his five-year contract, he became the nickel back and top backup to LCB **Deltha O'Neal**. If **Johnathan Joseph** is slow to recover from a broken bone in his left foot, Hall will compete with fourth-year pro **Keiwan Ratliff** for the starting job on the right side.

Hall is a swift, technicallysound player who is skilled at man, press and zone coverages. He's physical in the running game and has a knack for reading keys and anticipating where the ball is going.

As a rookie, Hall will get beat at times on double moves by elite receivers, but he has good ball skills and recovery speed.

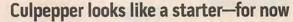
Safety is no concern

The Patriots are thin at cornerback, so firstround pick **Brandon Meriweather**'s reps at safety have all but disappeared.

He started out working at slot corner but quickly moved outside. Now he may have a chance to start opposite CB **Ellis Hobbs** if **Asante Samuel** does not sign before the start of the season.

Meriweather loves to hit, so he was initially reluctant to leave his safety position. But listed generously at 5-11, 192, he's built more like a cornerback and is naturally able to drop his hips, change direction and explode out of his backpedal.

The Patriots smartly tested his quickness over short spaces by matching him a lot against speedy WR **Wes Welker** early in camp. Even though Welker beat him a number of times, Meriweather held his own.

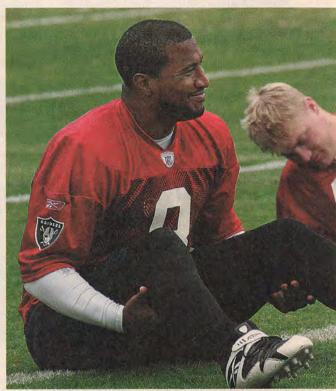


The Raiders' signing of **Daunte Culpepper** is an effort to intensify competition for their starting quarterback job.

Culpepper, 30, jumped right into the mix and is practicing without a brace on the right knee he injured in 2005. He will split practice and playing time with **Andrew Walter** and **Josh McCown** until coach **Lane Kiffin** gets a better feel for what each player can do.

Culpepper has the strongest arm and most experience. The only question is his health. So far, there doesn't appear to be anything Culpepper can't do—he's showing a strong arm, moving around smoothly and making every throw asked of him.

Don't be surprised if Culpepper is the starter by the regularseason opener. His presence will put pressure on Walter, especially when No. 1 overall pick **JaMarcus Russell** signs. Walter still is recovering from knee surgery and has not played well so far in camp.



Culpepper has a new team and improved health, but will his smile disappear when he sees his linemen in action?

special. He has great size (6-9, 350) and athleticism. With starting LT Jonathan Ogden sitting out because of a toe injury, Gaither has been getting lots of reps. He has quick feet and long arms that allow him to keep defenders away from his body. Gaither, though, must improve his technique. ... The spinal cord concussion suffered by BRONCOS OLB Warrick Holdman might turn the three-way battle for a starting job into a two-man race between D.D. Lewis and Nate Webster. And the winner may not be decided until at least the third exhibition game. Webster likely has an early lead because of a couple of loud hits early in camp, but Lewis is strong fundamentally. ... TEXANS WR Andre Davis, who is playing for his fourth team in six

seasons, is making a big push for the No. 2 or 3 job. Davis has showed off his speed and good hands, and his experience and ability to stretch the field give him the edge over many of the team's young receivers. ... BENGALS WR Skyler Green probably will win the punt return job because of Antonio Chatman's inability to stay healthy. The explosive Green is adept at catching the ball on the run, squaring his shoulders and bursting upfield. ... Free-agent pickup Eric Steinbach is on the verge of becoming an elite left guard for the BROWNS. Steinbach looks fast and strong and delivers a big punch on moving blocks. ... PATRIOTS WR Jabar Gaffney has jumped into the opening created by Donte' Stallworth's sore hamstring and been impressive

with the first team. Because he's able to recognize defenses quickly, Gaffney has a knack for getting open, particularly on intermediate routes. ... **DOLPHINS** rookie **John Beck** has at times been the sharpest quarterback in practices and already seems comfortable in the offense. His passes are crisp, and he can thread balls into double coverage. Beck isn't afraid to take risks.

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, Rich Cimini; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.

NFL INSIDE THE THE

LG Rob Sims looks comfortable working with the first team in SEAHAWKS camp despite having made only three career starts. He fires off the line on running plays and is displaying good feet and instincts as a pass blocker. During one practice, Sims came off his block to pick up a blitzing safety, which allowed RB Shaun Alexander to cut inside and get in the end zone. ... Despite losing free agents Todd Johnson and Cameron Worrell, the BEARS believed they had enough talent at safety to trade Chris Harris even though he started 20 games the past two seasons. Brandon McGowan, Tyler Everett and rookie Kevin Payne will fight for Harris' roster spot. ... **REDSKINS** rookie MLB H.B. Blades is running with the second unit and displaying a knack for cutting through interference to get to ballcar-

riers. He is bright and aggressive and moves well from one end of the line to the other. He could be an asset in shortyardage situations. ... With Michael Strahan holding out, William Joseph is lining up at left end with the GIANTS. The team is asking Joseph to concentrate mainly on stopping the run because rushing the passer off the edge isn't his strength. ... The EAGLES added DT Montae Reagor to boost their inside pass rush, but he's off to a slow start because of a leg injury. When he does get healthy, he'll be expected to be the team's inside nickel pass rusher at the very least. Reagor is known for a quick first step and his ability to disrupt plays. ... Jeff King was given the first opportunity to win the PANTHERS' starting tight end job, and he's taking advantage of it. He is a solid blocker but is making a bigger impression as a receiver. He has excellent hands and should develop into a reliable possession receiver. ... The VIKINGS' Chad Greenway doesn't appear to have lost any speed after missing his rookie season because of a torn ACL. That's critical because he's being asked to start at weakside linebacker, which is the

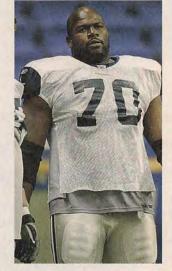
top playmaking position in the team's cover 2 defense. Greenway's speed allows him to stay with tight ends and even some wide receivers. He also adjusts well to the ball in the air. ... Terrelle Smith looks like he'll be the bruising blocker CARDINALS coaches want at fullback. A free-agent addition, Smith showed up overweight this spring but has dropped the extra pounds. He

has been lighting up defenders in full-contact drills at training camp. Smith also has made some nice catches out of the backfield. ... PACKERS QB Brett Favre reported to training

camp in excellent shape after working on quarterback-specific exercises with a personal trainer. In one drill, Favre would run through quarterback movements while tied to bungee cords. The resistance forced Favre to work on maintaining his fundamentals and got his heart rate up. Everything was timed to simulate game tempo. ... No. 2

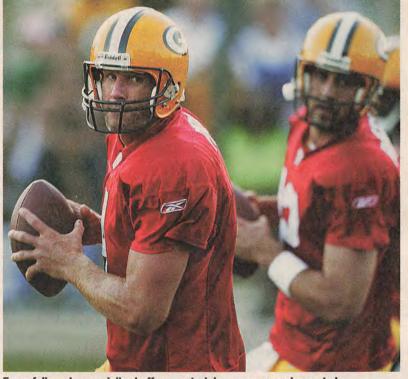


WR Terry Glenn (knee) will miss at least the first three exhibition games, and his absence has exposed the COWBOYS' lack of proven depth at wideout. Patrick Crayton is a quality third receiver but lacks Glenn's big-play ability. ... 49ERS rookie ILB Patrick Willis has shown tremendous range and instincts in drills. He's constantly around the ball; he intercepted passes on consecutive days and is stepping up to pop runners between the tackles. Willis is slated to be the nickel linebacker, but look for him to also push Derek Smith for playing time in the base 3-4. ... To take advantage of QB Jeff Garcia's mobility, BUCS coach Jon Gruden has added more scramble drills to practices. Receivers are being taught to keep moving even after they've



Davis puts the big in Big D

New Cowboys RG Leonard Davis has been a strong performer in training camp and has shown surprising quickness when asked to get to the perimeter on pulling plays. The team likes the 366-pound Davis at guard instead of tackle because he can get his hands on defensive tackles and make the best use of his strength. Though he was labeled an underachiever with the Cardinals, Davis represents a significant upgrade in Dallas. Back injuries had robbed predecessor Marco Rivera of the strength and power that made him a terrific player with the Packers.



Favre followed a specialized offseason training program and reported to Packers training camp in excellent shape.

30M TOP: M. SPENCER GREEN / AP; ROGELIO V. SOLIS / AP

Finally, a first impression

The Seahawks had to wait to try out one of the new toys they picked up in the offseason because DE Patrick Kerney missed the spring minicamps while rehabbing from surgery to repair a torn pectoral muscle that prematurely ended his 2006 season with the Falcons. Kerney has been worth the wait. He has been explosive coming off the edge as a pass rusher and disruptive against the run. The talents of Kerney and OLB Julian Peterson will allow the coaches to use more zone blitzes and some innovative schemes in which the two are stacked on the same side.

run their routes, and backs are being told to either look for open space or find an opponent to block if the play goes on longer than anticipated. ... RB Tatum Bell likely will be the LIONS' Week 1 starter, even if Kevin Jones (foot) is healthy. Bell has impressed the coaches with his speed and ability to make multiple cuts during a run. He also has good hands and route-running ability. When Bell splits out wide, he won't just be a decoy. ... Dwayne Blakley, an agile receiver, has taken control of the battle to back up FALCONS TE Alge Crumpler. Blakley has been a quick study of coach Bobby Petrino's offense, and he can line up as an H-back or be used on the line. Some added bulk should help Blakley with his blocking. ... WR Lance Moore, who spent most of the past two seasons on the SAINTS' practice squad, looks like the prime candidate to replace Michael Lewis as the kickoff and punt returner. Moore has also developed into a decent receiver. Coach Sean Payton has raved about Moore's work ethic, saying he has become more physical and is a quick study at every wideout spot. ... Without a prototypical nose tackle, the RAMS will go with more of a left tackle/right tackle alignment, which means they won't flop sides according to strength of the offensive formation. Now rookie Adam Carriker, an end in college, won't have to play exclusively at nose tackle. He has been an early standout in camp; the coaches love his old school approach.

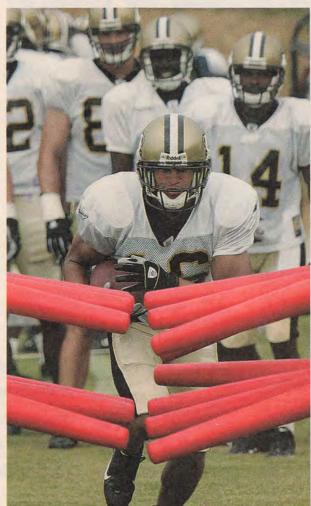
New Cat gets in his licks

The Panthers are expecting big things from **Chris Harris**, who was acquired in a trade with the Bears.
He has experience at both safety positions, but he's best on the strong side, where he's expected to start once he picks up the defensive system. Harris is a big hitter who figures to make the defense more physical, but he has a reputation for missing his target too often. At free safety, **Nate Salley** and **Deke Cooper** will compete with incumbent **Mike Minter**. Minter, 33, won't make critical mistakes but has lost a step and could be better suited for a reserve role at this stage in his career.

Filling a hole left by a Tank

The Bears shored up a major concern when they acquired DT Darwin Walker from the Bills and signed him to a five-year extension. The team thinks secondyear DT Dusty Dvoracek still could develop into a nice player, but he does not yet look ready for the rigors of the NFL after missing his rookie season because of foot surgery. He frequently was knocked to the ground early in camp. Walker is more talented than predecessor Tank Johnson and should form a nice duo with Tommie Harris. Both have the ability to shoot gaps and get into the backfield. With Harris drawing frequent double-teams, Walker could have a big season rushing the passer.





The Saints love the fact Moore will run through a brick wall or at least a bunch of foam pads—to make an impact.

Willing to do the dirty work

The 49ers are sticking with Arnaz Battle at flanker, and newcomer Darrell Jackson will start at split end. Battle brings a bruising style to the field, and that shows up in his blocking. His downfield interference helped spring RB Frank Gore on some of his longest runs last season, and coach Mike Nolan puts a premium on receivers who can block. The flanker is required to throw more blocks than any other receiver because he's typically on the strong side, which the 49ers favor when they run the ball.

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Pat Yasinskas; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Paul Schwartz; Philadelphia, Mark Eckel; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Dennis Georgatos; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody. Looking for an early upset? South Florida over Auburn on September 8.

Six sleepers are ready to stir things up **Leavitt has South** Florida on track to do big things this season and in the future.

By Matt Hayes

mhayes@sportingnews.com

ou know it bugs him. How could it not? It has been 11 years since Jim Leavitt and Bob Stoops, then a couple of young assistants, left Kansas State to find themselves as football coaches.

Stoops became Florida's defensive coordinator and then went to Oklahoma, where he is one of the game's top three head coaches. Leavitt left and became—what?

"Bob and I were a couple of young guys with big dreams," Leavitt says. "It was all a blank canvas."

Now, finally, it's a work of art for both of them.

They took different roads to get there but are

in the same neighborhood again. In fact, Leavitt—the coach at South Florida since Day 1 in 1996—arguably has a better team than Stoops for the first time since those purple-and

The Illini will quadruple

their win total from last

season, and Ron Zook

will be the Big Ten

coach of the year.

-white spring scrimmages long ago in Manhattan.

South Florida went into Morgantown last season and physically beat the snot out of West Virginia. The Bulls won nine games with freshman quarterback Matt Grothe, who won't remind you of Patrick White but had defensive coor-

dinators scrambling to find ways to contain him.

Looking for an early upset? South Florida over Auburn on September 8. Looking for a Big East sleeper? South Florida, which plays league heavyweights West Virginia and Louisville in Tampa.

The Bulls are deep and physical and will have the league's top newcomer in freshman tailback Mike Ford, a beast who could make a good season magical.

Other sleepers in BCS conferences:

ACC: N.C. State. I know, I must be crazy. Walk with me on this one.

Former coach Chuck Amato wasn't the best leader or teacher, but he recruited his tail off. New coach Tom O'Brien means business; dude does not fool around.

Trust me, I saw the look in man-child defensive tackle DeMario Pressley's eyes when he admitted he was "afraid of coach O'Brien." And I saw star wideout Darrell Blackman's uneasy response: "He's not the only guy who's afraid of him."

The Wolfpack returns good speed and personnel on both sides of the ball, and if Daniel Evans or Nebraska transfer Harrison Beck produces at quarterback, this team will be more than just bowl eligible in the deep Atlantic Division.

SEC: South Carolina. It's about players, people. Gamecocks coach Steve Spurrier admitted last month that his defense will be very good—even though many of the seven returning starters won't be starting.

That's a clear indication of how well South Carolina recruited the past two seasons, including landing potential starters Travian Robertson and Eric Norwood at end and Kenrick Ellis at tackle. But it's all about the offense with Spurrier—and everything relies on quirky, inconsistent quarterback Blake Mitchell.

If Mitchell plays as well as he did in the last month of last season, this team can win the East Division. If he plays as poorly as he did in the first month, the Gamecocks will have a new quarterback by October and will be bellyfeeding star tailback Cory Boyd.

Big Ten: Illinois. I said it's about players, remember? There is *way* too much good, young talent—quarterback Juice Williams, wideout Arrelious Benn, cornerback Vontae Davis—for

this team to muddle through another bowl-less season.

I'm telling you, the Illini will quadruple their win total (from two to eight), and Ron Zook will be the league's coach of the year. Eight wins against a league schedule that includes games against the Big Three (Ohio State, Michigan,

Wisconsin) would be gargantuan progress.

Big 12: Kansas. I admit it. I've got a soft spot for the Round Mound of Manginotown. As far as X's and O's go, Mark Mangino is *way* under-

rated, and his team plays hard every week.

Yet I got a chuckle when he talked this spring about an open quarterback competition. This is Mangino's most talented team since he arrived in 2002, and the last thing he needs is a flip-flop at the most important position.

Todd Reesing is a tough kid, but he ain't Kerry Meier. Look, Meier wins big games and maybe—just maybe—a division title. Reesing gets you a postseason "evaluation" in the big chair in athletic director Lew Perkins' office.

Pac-10: Arizona. Two ends of the spectrum: Bob Stoops in his first three seasons at Oklahoma (31-7 and a national title) and Mike Stoops in his first three at Arizona (12-22 and three horrific offenses).

New coordinator Sonny Dykes will help Arizona's offense become more efficient and versa-

tile. Still, the reason the Wildcats will go bowling for the first time since 1998 is defense.

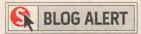
USC and UCLA will have the best defenses in college football this fall. If I extend that list a

speedreads

Bobby Bowden says he wants to win one more national championship. I love you, Pops, but you better think about winning your division first or you may not be around long enough to see title No. 3.

Good to see BYU extended Bronco Mendenhall's contract. It's not like Mendenhall is going anywhere—he has his dream job—but the good faith shown by the administration will pay off down the line.

little further, Arizona—with three of the Pac-10's best defensive players in cornerback Antoine Cason, linebacker Spencer Larsen and end Louis Holmes—falls somewhere from No. 8 to 10. Not bad for the pass-happy conference.**SN**



'How on God's green earth did Notre Dame get 90 points in the coaches poll? If Charlie Weis wins more than eight games this year, he is a genius.'

OK, Irish fans, tell Tom Dienhart what you think at sportingnews.com.



RB Hershel Dennis' career at Southern California has been defined by a fumble near the goal line in a triple-overtime loss at Cal in 2003-a mistake that contributed to the only blip in a 46-game run that started in 2002 and ended in 2005. That's not why you should pull for him this fall. This is: Dennis is getting another chance after back-toback knee injuries kept him off the field since 2004. After the NCAA approved a sixth year of eligibility for Dennis, he rolled through spring drills and became the team's No.1 back. Coach Pete Carroll reiterated that last week, saying Dennis is the most complete player at a position that is 10-deep and has eight former high school All-Americans. Super recruit Joe

McKnight will get his touches, but Dennis—if he stays healthy—will be carrying the ball for first downs in the fourth quarter. > Forget about Big Ten expansion. Yes, Rutgers would be a nice fit because it would bring the New York City television market to the new Big Ten Network. But the conference won't rush to add Rutgers. Where would that leave the Big Ten if Notre Dame, a year or so from now, wanted to get into a conference? Says one BCS official: "It's Notre Dame or no one." > It's



USC has plenty of options at running back—10 if you're counting—but Dennis will be the go-to guy if he stays healthy.

time for Texas coach Mack Brown to take a significant step to curtail some of the program's off-field problems. Five players have been arrested in the past two months and 10 since the team won the 2005 national title. But even though Brown is probably too lenient, a coach can't be expected to babysit 24 hours a day. Bottom line: This program has lacked locker room leadership since Vince Young left after the 2005 season. A big issue on some teams is how the players who don't get into trouble deal with the ones who do. > It's no wonder non-BCS schools are so defensive. The latest scheduling craze for BCS schools: agree to a home-and-home game with a non-BCS team, play the first game at home and then buy out the road game. Syracuse recently informed Wyoming it won't return a game in 2009, though that might be because Wyoming took the Orange to double overtime before losing last season. Another problem: Non-BCS teams can't increase buyouts to deter the practice because BCS

teams will simply shop the game until they find an opponent—non-BCS or I-AA—that will accept. > Jack Elway didn't put up big numbers during his junior season in Englewood, Colo., and he's not among the top 25 pro-style quarterbacks or top 250 players overall on Rivals.com. Yet Elway has received offers from LSU and Oregon, and more will come this fall. The reasons: He has decent size (6-2, 197), and some guy named John Elway has taught him a little about the position over the years.

Three-leaf clover

The Celtics' bold trade for KEVIN GARNETT gives them a trio of All-Stars. But will it be enough to turn their luck around? By Steve Bulpett

Danny Ainge was

enough to net a

Hall of Fame big

able to store

man. Did he

mortgage his

the process?

Yes. Willingly.

team's future in

fter years with their nose pressed against the glass that separated them from the true Eastern Conference contenders, the Celtics finally have themselves a ticket. A Big Ticket. Now they get to see how far that pass takes them.

Whether the addition of Kevin Garnett will ultimately bear the kind of fruit that is enjoyed in June (that'd be

The Finals) is still very much in question. And it seems clear that this group, which also features All-Stars Ray Allen and Paul Pierce, will still need significant help to even think about dealing with a Western Conference foe in a seven-game series.

Fortunately for the Celtics, the season doesn't start tomorrow. No matter what the GPA (Garnett, Pierce, Allen) number is on any given night, there is still much roster work to be done. The Celtics gave away five players (and two draft picks) to get Garnett from the Timberwolves, and his massive contract leaves little room for higher-priced

support to fill out the locker room. Team boss Danny Ainge has repeatedly said he's not through yet, and what he can muster will be critical. With his three All-Stars all beginning the season at age 30 or beyond, time is of the essence. The club should clearly be better a year from now when it has had a chance to get deeper into the offseason marketplace (most of this year's decent free agents are gone), but with so much invested in the present, it can't afford to squander any time.

The change in approach is striking for the Celts. Through the years of building with youth to gather the chips Ainge said he needed as currency, he was able to store enough to net a Hall of Fame big man. Did he mortgage his team's future in the process? Yes. Willingly. The Celtics know full well that Al Jefferson, the key to the trade from Minnesota's perspective, will be chalking up double doubles well after Garnett has played his last game. But even with Jefferson, the C's were staring at a dilemma. If they couldn't add enough around him and Pierce in the near future, they would be forced to trade Pierce and get even younger.

After nurturing Jefferson for three years, Ainge-who Jefferson said was the only one who believed in him during a rough second season-was sad to see him go. But Ainge had no choice other than to finally lasso the future and reel it into closer proximity. With an owner-

ship and fan base wanting to see a quicker return on their investments after two straight miserable seasons, there wasn't much of a decision to make when adding Garnett became a real possibility.

Now comes the hard part. Without more work from Ainge, the club is still no favorite to win the East despite the fact the conference grades on a

curve. But if some serviceable types can be brought in to bolster the pointsigning Eddie House last week was just a start-and the pivot, the Celtics will be there until the end.

Point guard Rajon Rondo remains a major source of both hope and concern. He will be counted on to run the offense in just his second year, and, as opposed to in his rookie season, the games will now count.

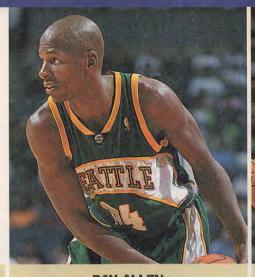
His outside shot is still a question, and his lack of experience could be frightening down

the stretch. But his speed, quickness, defensive sense and work ethic have the Celts crossing their fingers and believing he may be able to handle things.

However, for the Shamrocks to be more than a top-heavy sideshow, they will also need swingman Tony Allen to come back healthy from a torn ACL and for center Kendrick Perkins to play lighter and better after dragging around a sore foot last season.

With such issues still unresolved, it's too early to state definitively that the balance of power has shifted in the East. But the room where things get decided has become a bit more crowded.





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GANGGREEN

KEVIN GARNETT

Age at start of 2007-08 season: 31. Experience: 12 years. All-Star Games: 10. Salary: \$23.8 million.

Eight playoff appearances, two series wins.

Tom Gugliotta, Stephon Marbury, Sam Cassell, Latrell Sprewell. Borderline All-Stars are put on this earth to lose—repeatedly—come playoff time.

K.G. was a man on fire in 2004, leaving 24.3 ppg and 14.6 rpg on the floor in the playoffs before the Lakers killed the dream. Three long years ago, no one thought to blame the obvious culprit: Flip Saunders.

"I deserve a better team. I don't think I can take another one of these rebuilding stages." —Garnett in 2006

"It's wonderful to have the opportunity to play with players the quality of Paul and Ray."

"His biggest attribute is his intensity. He brings the low-post options, the pick-and-rolls, his ability to pick and pop and make shots. Plus, he's a great passer. And his ego doesn't make him shoot 25 times a night."

RAY ALLEN

PRIME NUMBERS

Age at start of 2007-08 season: 32. Experience: 11 years. All-Star Games: seven. Salary: \$16 million.

DISAPPEARING ACTS

Four playoff appearances, three series wins.

BEST TEAMMATES

Glenn Robinson, Sam Cassell, Terrell Brandon, Rashard Lewis. "Havlicek stole the ball!" moments were few and far between for these defensive jugger-nots.

ONE LONELY CONFERENCE FINALS

In 2001, Jesus Shuttlesworth averaged 25.1 points and 6.0 rebounds in the playoffs as the Bucks made it all the way to Game 7 before falling to the 76ers. Alas, better times were but a deranged fantasy.

IT WAS UGLY ...

"Nobody should walk away from this feeling like they did a good job." —Allen in 2007

... BUT NOW IT'S BEAUTIFUL

"This was a long time coming."

SCOUTS TAKE

"He's not going to have to do nearly as much as he did in Seattle. He's going to make a living spotting up for 3s. He's not going to see as many double-teams, which will save the wear and tear on his body."

PAUL PIERCE

Age at start of 2007-08 season: 30. Experience: nine years. All-Star Games: five. Salary: \$16.4 million.

Four playoff appearances, three series wins.

Antoine Walker (OK), Kenny Anderson (sheesh), Ricky Davis (yikes), Wally Szczerbiak (gesundheit). Clearly, all these guys needed was Sam Cassell.

Pierce made his rep in the 2002 playoffs, pumping in 24.6 ppg as the C's came up two wins short against the Nets. What's followed has been enough to make Pierce miss the days of choking at Kansas.

"I never thought in my ninth year I'd be playing on a team with the worst record in the NBA. How much longer do I got to play?" —Pierce in 2007

"I feel like a rookie again."

"Pierce is the penetrator, the guy who thrives in one-on-one, slashing to the basket and drawing fouls. He's going to draw attention, and that's going to open up shots on the draw-and-kick for Allen and all the other guys."—Steve Greenberg

Meanwhile, in Minnesota ...

The Timberwolves suddenly have a massive logiam of bodies. The ideal scenario probably includes moving Ricky Davis and Marko Jaric to clear minutes for the youngsters, but finding a trading partner to take Jaric's contract won't be easy.

First-round pick Corey Brewer defends better than any of the other wing players, but Gerald Green and Rashad McCants won't be able to develop if they're on the bench. And is Randy Foye ready to become the full-time point guard? As one NBA scout points out, he's much more of a scorer than a distributor, which means Sebastian Telfair will get new life as a backup point.

Al Jefferson immediately becomes the No. 1 low-post scoring option, but adjusting to life as a power forward in the West won't be easy. Mr. Jefferson, you know Mr. Duncan, Mr. Stoudemire and Mr. Boozer, don't you? Enjoy your welcome-to-the-neighborhood basket. —Ryan Fagan

BOB LEVERONE / SN (3)

For recruits, breaking up is way too easy to do.

I've got a problem with decommitment

By Mike DeCourcy

decourcy@sportingnews.com

y original plan was to write this column about Los Angeles area point guard Brandon Jennings, a dazzling talent who will join the Arizona Wildcats in the fall of 2008.

But then I decommitted.

It is all the rage in this sport, so I decided to give it a try.

Decommit is not even a word, you know. Merriam-Webster, which earlier this summer opened its pages to include ginormous, spits back a request for the definition of decommit like a mouthful of foul sushi.

We made up *decommit* so we could explain the phenomenon of players making public pledges to college programs, then

'What is a commitment?

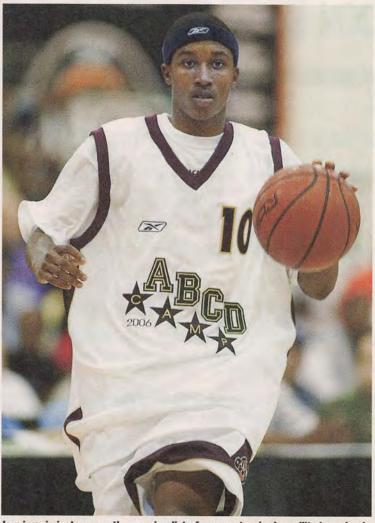
A commitment now tells everybody who they've got to beat.'

-Nebraska coach Doc Sadler

changing their minds and shopping for different scholarships.

The decommitment contagion cheapens the sport and teaches young men that giving their word means nothing. It damages college programs that change their roster-building strategy after receiving commitments. Losing a player to decommitment is like having points wiped from the scoreboard in the middle of a game.

"We've created one big circus," says Scout.com recruiting analyst Dave Telep. He estimates between 15 and 20 percent of the top 300 players in the Class of 2008 decommitted from their original college choices.



Jennings is just one on the growing list of prospects who have jilted a school.

speedread

Perhaps the most memorable moment from the summer recruiting scene was a devastating two-hand dunk by Xavier recruit Kenny Frease, a 6-11 center playing for the D-1 Greyhounds in a Reebok Summer Championships game. Frease's dunk contained so much power the rim continued to rattle—I timed it—for 2 minutes, 40 seconds. The Greyhounds had four possessions at the quaking goal before it settled.

"It's becoming more and more of an issue with basketball," Nebraska coach Doc Sadler says. "What is a commitment? A commitment now tells everybody who they've got to beat."

No. 7 on Telep's list of the top senior prospects, Jennings is the highest-rated player in his class to decommit. He chose Southern California last November but bailed months later and decided on Arizona. No. 33 Luke Babbitt picked Ohio State, changed his mind and

instead will play at Nevada. No. 79 Tyreese Breshers chose Miami in early July—and stuck with it for a whopping 13 days. Then he said he'd rather go to Washington.

The current structure of the recruiting process encourages rash decisions by players and reckless scholarship offers from coaches. It allows coaches to poach their rivals' committed prospects.

The way to stop this nonsense is to make fundamental changes in the National Letter of Intent. Allowing players to sign only during a few designated weeks is an antiquated practice that must be abolished.

If a player is willing to make a commitment, he should be able to make it permanent by signing a letter. If a program is ready to offer a scholarship, it should be willing to put that offer in writing. "Let's see how many college coaches are going to offer eighth- and ninth-graders then," Telep says.

Making this happen probably would require the National Association of Basketball Coaches petitioning the Collegiate Commissioners Association, which operates the letter of intent program, and seeking its approval. This project should be a priority

for the NABC.

At dinner in Las Vegas last month with members of the Miami coaching staff, I mentioned my theory that a typical prospect now looks at a college commitment like he does his high school girlfriend. Maybe it's true love; maybe something better will come along.

"Yeah, but we're married to them," Miami coach Frank Haith said. Or maybe it was his assistant Michael Schwartz who made that comment.

I'm not committing to anything.

SN

After competing this summer with USA Basketball and serving as a counselor at the LeBron James Skills Academy, Michigan State G **Drew Neitzel** expects to handle even more of a leadership role as a senior. The Spartans added three elite recruits, including SG **Durrell Summers** and SG **Chris Allen**; the latter has been impressive in summer play. "We're going to have the talent and depth and all that," Neitzel says. "It's just going to be a matter of chemistry." Neitzel frequently

switches roles, from running the offense to playing as a shooting guard. He calls himself a "a scoring point guard who creates stuff for his teammates as well." Between his own baskets and those generated by his assists, Neitzel accounted for roughly 45 percent of MSU's points last season. > Among players who could enroll in college in the fall of 2008, C John Riek, a 7-2 prospect from Sudan, probably was the most impressive on the July summer circuit. Riek is expected to attend the Winchendon School in Massachusetts this fall. It has been reported Riek graduated from high school in Africa, which would make him eligible for next June's NBA draft; it also has been reported he is 17 years old, which would mean he'd have to wait. Riek has long arms and legs and is not fluid, but he plays with passion and intensity and is rapidly improving. That's why it's hard not to compare him to former Georgetown center Dikembe Mutombo. > The winning school among the nine still in the hunt for 6-8 prospect Chris Singleton of Dunwoody, Ga., can figure out whether he's a power forward or small forward when he gets



on campus. He does not have great ballhandling skills but has a nice jumper and is capable of getting seriously hot from 3-point range. He competes hard, is athletic and will be an asset to a high-major team. His Atlanta Celtics won the Adidas Super 64 tournament in Las Vegas. Tennessee followed Singleton closely throughout July but will have to beat out Louisville and Kentucky, among others. > If junior PG A.J. Price isn't able to make the necessary improvements to lift

Connecticut back toward the postseason, coach Jim Calhoun probably won't hesitate to take a shot with freshman PG Donnell Beverly. Although Beverly was not as widely recruited as many current Huskies, the coaching staff believes strongly in his potential. > Louisiana Tech landed a big-time recruit in F Olu Ashaolu. Because he finished his core courses this past spring, he will be eligible to compete in the 2007-08 season despite previously being considered a class of 2008 recruit. But it's possible Ashaolu will redshirt and use the year to work with coach Kerry Rupp and develop his perimeter skills with an eye toward eventually making it as an NBA player. > Don't be surprised if Providence plays more man-to-man defense this season. Coach Tim Welsh once worked under Syracuse's Jim Boeheim and learned the value of a solid 2-3 zone, but the Friars lately haven't been good enough in that scheme. They ranked 12th in the Big East in field goal percentage defense last season. With a variety of scoring options, the team might be better served pushing the pace past the 80 points-per-game mark.

College coaches need summer vacations, too

It is easy and convenient to blame the death of Wake Forest coach Skip Prosser on his profession. It's right there in reach, given what we know about the travel, long hours and pressure coaches endure. It's also a mistake.

If coaching produced an inordinate number of these tragedies, perhaps there would be some merit to the idea that the strain of July recruiting was a contributing factor. But what happened to Prosser is not common. According to ACC basketball historian Barry Jacobs, Prosser was the league's first coach to die while active.

Of course, basketball coaches do need a recruiting calendar that allows them the kind of built-in breaks football coaches get. Division I football coaches are able to play golf or vacation with their families without fear their programs or recruiting efforts will collapse.

Those basketball coaches who do become ill must be more serious about addressing this disparity. And they need cooperation from NCAA administrators with some understanding of the competitive environment of college coaching.

During the July recruiting period, Ohio State coach Thad Matta traveled while recovering from back surgery that left him unable to drive. OSU petitioned the NCAA to allow an extra staff member on the road who could shuttle Matta to games and, when Matta needed rest, take his place scouting.

The NCAA said Matta could have a driver but not a sub.



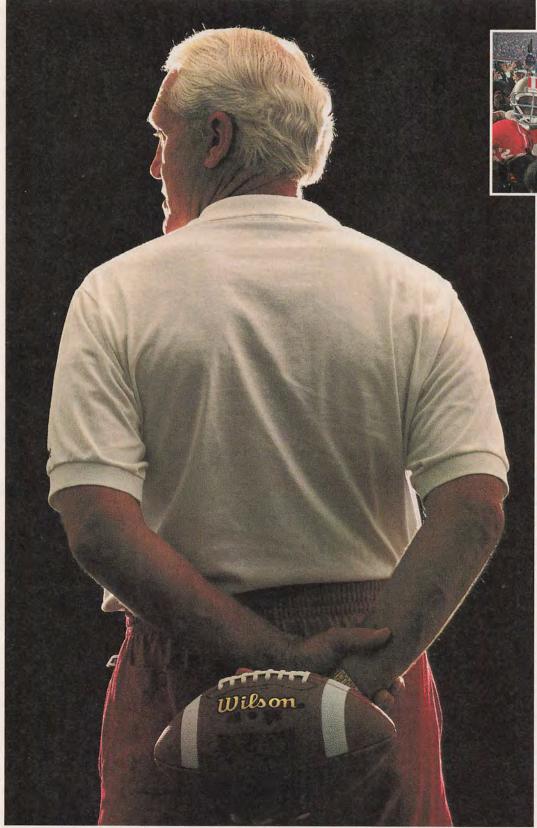
Matta waited until the season was over to have back surgery, but he still didn't get much of a break.

BLOG ALERT

'All the preps-to-pros players the Celtics gave up in the Kevin Garnett trade are proof of how drunk the NBA had once become on the idea of getting something for almost nothing.'

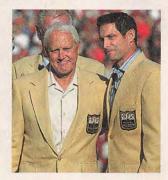
Mike DeCourcy says when players go to college, everybody wins.

Think he's got a thing or two to learn? Tell him at sportingnews.com.





There were three Super Bowls won and a parade of giants—such as Steve Young—under his wing.



REMEMBERING Bill Walsh

Genius isn't a word that's just thrown around, not even in sports. Walsh's approach to X's and O's necessitated a sea change in offensive philosophy at all levels of football; countless coaches decided that embracing the West Coast offense was the only way to keep up.

To this day, the Walsh coaching tree is a wonder to behold. George Seifert, Sam Wyche, Dennis Green and Mike Holmgren are among those who worked for him directly.

He is known best for winning three Super Bowls with the 49ers, but did you know he coached only 10 seasons in San Francisco? He was the organization's president and general manager in the 1980s and a V.P. and G.M. from 1999 to 2001.

Walsh, whom Jerry Rice once called "another father," died last week after a long battle with leukemia. He was 75.

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